最強をこごらせた
レベルカンスト剣聖女
ベアトリーチェの弱点
鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
illust. 真早
5
その名は「ぶーぶー」
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The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman - Volume 05

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残る八時間の運命を
あくまで生きとし生きる者へと預けるため、
アビスは誰にも気づかれる事のない
孤独な戦争へ全力で挑んでいく。
巨大兵器工廠ground's_nirが製造した最終兵器
アビス
『演算コアを最適化、領域確保』
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真早

【妖精】達の女王
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最強をこごしらせた レベルカンスト剣聖女 ベアトリーチェの弱点5

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI
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News: New Area “Underworld” Has Been Unlocked!

A path had opened.

The words of Abyss, the girl-shaped weapon built at the bottom level of the giant armory known as Ground’s Nir, had hinted at the existence of the Underworld and its existence provided a path toward securing a technique of directly working with the souls of living beings – and thus a means of saving the Iberian Orc souls digitally trapped inside Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon.

It felt like the dark, dark night had been swept away as the sun finally rose above the horizon.

However…

“What is that? It’s too soon for dawn.”

“Wait, is that lava!?”

Beatrice, the Holy Swordswoman in red armor and a white miniskirt, shouted what she thought was burning its color into the sky, but she did not have the whole picture here.

The trees of the forest and the rising and falling land

produced a dark horizon. And she caught occasional glimpses of something intermittently bursting toward the heavens from beyond it.

It reminded her of a raging pot boiling fiercely to bring suffering to the sinners in the depths of hell.

“…What is going on?” asked Boo Boo.

It could not be sensed with one’s eyes or ears, but a highly ominous sense approached like ripples. And Holy Swordswoman Beatrice, White Witch Filinion, Fighter Priest Armelina, and Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau all looked to the epicenter as if their eyes were drawn toward that omen.

They were afraid to look.

But they were even more afraid to not look.

It was the worst kind of internal discord, where both sides of the scale were loaded with negatives.

To find out what was happening, Boo Boo and the others wrapped bandages around the arm of Ground’s Nir Abyss, the girl doll who was resting inside the brick house’s attic, left her there, walked through the dark forest, and climbed a hill that gave them a view of the moonlit coastline.

It may have been wrong to phrase it this way in Ground’s Nir.

But a different world spread out below their eyes.

“What…is this…?”

That was all Beatrice managed to get out through her trembling lips.

They had come here to find the answer, whether it was a good one or a bad one. And yet what they saw before them was enough to utterly baffle them.

Let us objectively describe what they could see.

Even though it would take three days to walk the perimeter, the entire island could be swallowed whole by what they saw. That far-too-giant thing was a massive marine lifeform that looked like a half-rotted shark or killer whale. It had run aground with such force it seemed to be trying to devour the beach and the blood gushing from its rotten cross-sections was what they had originally noticed. It glowed with a bright and sinister light, just like magma erupting from a wound in the ground.

The plain but beautiful coastline, which had been covered with white sand that glittered in the moonlight, had completely changed.

It had become a Black Labyrinth. That was due to what was overflowing from the wounds of the giant rotting marine creature. They were pitch black monsters that looked like a fusion of a spider and a crab and that stood taller than a human. They swarmed out onto the beach and spewed more and more thick threads which had a deeper color than the darkness.

Yes, it was a spider web.

But instead of a flat net, it looked more like the tunnel-shaped nests found in green hedge trees. They moved front and back, left and right, up and down. As the threads intertwined, the Black Labyrinth grew and covered the moonlit white sand in the blink of an eye. The territory of death was growing. The white was stained black.

To be honest…

Beatrice had thought the Underworld’s arrival was an opportunity. If the afterlife physically existed and there were practical methods of using and interfering with what people called spirits or souls, then they could free the Iberian Orc souls trapped in Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon. If they were resurrected, they could overcome the loathsome attack on their village.

But she had been mistaken.

A war of invasion was entirely different from a war of being invaded.

This was no time to be thinking about such a distant goal. She had to focus on today. If they did not get through this battle, they would be killed and it would all be over with no hope whatsoever.

She began looking at it like that.

But even that proved naïve.

“U-umm, what is that…?”

The next realization started with a comment from White Witch Filinion.

She touched the side of her glasses, perhaps to adjust the distance that was in focus.

“I feel like…I’ve seen that equipment somewhere…?”

Another group moved independently of the spider-crab fusions weaving their Black Labyrinth to overwrite the scenery.

Were there 100 of them? 200? …No, more than that.

Was it the moonlight shining on them, or were they faintly glowing on their own? They were perfectly visible even in this darkness void of artificial lights.

It was an army.

And they appeared to be human.

Their equipment seemed to be the same as that of a Guild with which they had once clashed.

They wore hooded cloaks along with something like bulletproof jackets made from several layers of leather and crudely-made paper. It looked like they had used fantasy materials to create the combat armor of special forces. And in addition to their Shining Weapon swords and spears that could use Magic, they also wielded machineguns made of wood and steel.

Armelina quietly spoke the name of these former soldiers.

“Is that Elkiad…?”

But something was clearly different about them.

The guns they wielded were more combat-oriented and, more importantly, this group of experienced old soldiers produced a pressure two or three layers thicker than the group that Beatrice’s party had fought in the inn town. They knew nothing but battle and they could not imagine any other way of life. This combat group had remade themselves into a single weapon.

They were Elkiad, but they were not Elkiad.

And they had come from the Underworld.

“You’re kidding, right?” One worst case scenario occurred to Beatrice. “Is this Elkiad at their prime, back when they attacked Boo Boo’s village!? Did the Underworld swallow up the souls of the fierce warriors who fought alongside the Sage and then disappeared!?”

The souls of the dead did not deteriorate with time.

And now those battle-crazed berserkers had been released onto this small island once more.

Yes. Their next battle would not end even if they died.

“Squeal…”

Even Boo Boo uttered a weak voice at that.

The people who had personally destroyed his village were rushing in en masse. And yet the long time since that event had soothed his heart with an assurance that he would never see them again. The pressure bearing down on his chest had to be far greater than for Beatrice and the others.

And then he said something more.

“S-
squeee

meeee

It was the Holy Swordswoman who had drawn her Shining Weapon rapier and dyed her right side crimson with hellfire.

The fire raged as she spoke.

“Why are you taking advantage of this emergency to seduce my Boo Boo, cow…?”

“Gyaaaaahhh!! Is this what it feels like to be hit by Lady Hera’s lightning after Lord Zeus assaults you!!!???”

Now that the Underworld had made an appearance, what would happen if they died here?

What fate awaited White Witch Filinion as she was nearly turned into the very first test subject?

Chapter 1: Hopeless Entrance * War Einherjar

Part 1

The army of the dead continued to swarm out from the beached Underworld.

The response of Ground's Nir's residents was simple.

Overall, there were two primary courses of action.

"Run away. We need to abandon the inn town. If they catch us, it's all over. Escape to your Gates!!"

"Wait a second! My Gate is inside the town!"

"How long does it take for the Sign Out authorization? Damn, they'll catch up if we don't buy some time!!"

However it had happened, these were all fierce warriors who were exploring this unknown world for their own goals. So not

even the humans were utterly routed from the very, very beginning.

Some fought back out of bravery and others to test out the enemy's strength.

They had intended for it to be a quick, probing skirmish, but every last one of them lost their lives.

Figures walked with an unsteady gait between the buildings that had partially collapsed into bizarre pieces of art.

"What are those things…?"

Dawn was a long way off.

A Pure Knight man carrying a large silver shield leaned against the remains of a brick wall at the base of what had once been a bell tower used in the Griffon races and he desperately tried to suppress his heavy breathing.

One problem was how strong they were.

Lightning, gravity, and lava. Their skill with Magic alone put them squarely in the Level Capper category. And in addition to their Shining Weapons, they wielded what were essentially assault rifles and machineguns with stocks made by carving down white bones. They used a combination of high and low fantasy that left no openings in their attacks. They had polished their power to kill and technique to reap lives. These were the movements of people who breathed the air of war like it was normal and set foot on the battlefield like it was normal.

And on top of that, a female voice cried out in an unstable mixture of sorrow and anger from beyond the half-crumbled wall.

“Hey, wait! What’s with you, Befana!? We’ve always been in the same Party, haven’t we!? Please listen to me! Hey! G-gyah! Gyah, gyah, gyaaaahhhh!?”

(You goddamn idiot!)

There was no time to go save her.

This was the second problem, the true fear. No one was allowed to die here, so it was not just an issue of survival or death. The dead had risen for this limited period of time. So they would join their army and swarm the remaining survivors.

It was a snowball effect.

There was no point in even considering approaching that giant “thing” on the beach and driving it back.

As things were, even falling back was risky.

(Lives have no value here. It’s like taking shogi pieces. They outnumbered us in the first place, but if the Level Cappers keep falling left and right, there’ll be no stopping them!!)

If he was being honest, the Pure Knight man did not know if he could travel through his Gate on his own. He had no idea how many times he would have to narrowly avoid death to escape the inn town and there was a wait of a few minutes to

Sign Out to earth. The value of a single second had changed drastically. If he stood still in the middle of an empty field, he would end up with a bullet through his head and that was that.

But at the moment, he was still alive.

A giant form blocked out the bright, sinister light of the moon.

A 1000m dragon flew through the moonlit night and passed over the Pure Knight's head.

That was a Break News, a paradox with a soul.

The Thousand Dragon produced thick rainclouds from the pressure difference created by her flight and, the instant she opened her great maw, something like a beam of ultra-high pressure water tore through the main street.

No, it was not just her.

A Vampire surrounded by glowing red bats jumped along the surviving rooftops, the peak of the Mandragoras covered the ground, and the Fairy Queen spread butterfly wings made of toxic blood.

It was unclear if the violent Break News were admirable enough to want to protect the humans. They may have simply been irritated by the army wreaking havoc in their territory.

But it was an opportunity nonetheless.

By restraining his impatience and holding out to the very end,

this chance at survival had rolled into his grasp.

(It's now or never!!)

He waved to his comrades hiding behind a different pile of rubble, telling them to run. There was no guarantee those that followed his instructions would survive. They might immediately be shot in the back with an assault rifle and tormented on the bloody road. But while the dead were focused on that one sacrifice, someone else might be able to escape. Their flight had devolved to that level. Even after abandoning their pride to ensure their safety, they were still forced to gamble with their own lives.

But even that was an opportunity.

Fleeing was risky and staying meant annihilation. It was that kind of battle.

If they did not put enough distance between themselves and the dead pushing in from the beach, they would not have enough time to Sign Out through their Gates. So their only option was to flee while the Break News were fighting.

And as the Pure Knight man ran from the town with all his might, a thick gust of wind passed him in the opposite direction.

It was a hideous Nonhuman who normally would not be allowed to even set foot in the inn town.

It was Boo Boo.

He stood nearly four meters tall and he did not hesitate to attack the dead.

Part 2

Ghosts were scary.

A being that had overcome death and was enveloped in enough rage and hatred to alter the laws of the world was frightening.

But as soon as he knew they were attempting to do clear harm to living people, the bonds of fear inside Boo Boo were torn apart.

Protecting something with physical form took precedence over trembling in fear over something formless.

“!?”

“!!”

The roar of clashing metal exploded within a plaza of the crumbling town.

The extremely muscular Iberian Orc swung a Shining Weapon as thick as a log or steel beam and it was caught by the

double-edged longsword of a faintly glowing old soldier. And since the soldier held a heavy machinegun as long as a spear in his left hand, he was effectively wielding it in one hand.

This was abnormal even for a Level Capper supported by Magic.

On top of that, the gray-haired and bearded old man had a fierce smile on his lips.

“Alpha Zero to all. Alpha Zero to all.”

That included a code never heard in the lives of Boo Boo and the other Nonhumans.

They were pure war fighters and utterly obsessed with battle.

They were the Elkiad soldiers who had cast a dark shadow on Boo Boo’s kind life.

And this was them in their prime.

“Ha ha ha!! Now ain’t this lucky? This is why it’s worth stubbornly clinging to this boring world. To think I’d get to fight an Iberian Orc again!!!!!”

As soon as he heard an unpleasant bursting sound, Boo Boo’s nose twitched and he obeyed his intuition by falling back with all his might. What he had smelled was likely ozone. A roar soon followed and tremendous electricity whirled around the old soldier. The intense heat transformed the ground around the old soldier, forming a splash-shape of glass in a circle around him.

But it was not over after dodging that.

For one thing, he wielded two weapons. Now that his enemy had moved away, it was time to use the heavy machinegun he held at his hip.

He really did fire with one hand.

With the deep sound of rapid-fire, masses of lead thicker than a human thumb were spewed out. The anti-materiel bullets were fired at a rate greater than 2000 per minute and they used more than just their weight and speed. A Magically-produced and massively high-voltage current surrounded the bullets in electricity and transformed them in real time. The incredible heat melted the masses of lead and they were reformed in midair. Sometimes they tapered down like a needle to reduce air resistance and raise their speed. Other times they opened up like an umbrella to strike the air and hit their target with a shockwave.

This kind of versatility was unusual for a heavy firearm.

Predicting the line of fire from the muzzle's direction and fleeing behind cover was not enough to escape. Anyone but Boo Boo would have been burst like a bloody water balloon before making it three steps.

Boo Boo jumped around like a pinball, rapidly moved between the walls and roofs, and fled the line of bullet holes pursuing him like a great serpent would its prey. The mad warrior narrowed his eyes and viewed him like some radiant object. The old man viewed this fierce warrior who was not

killed from the first attack and could stand on the same stage as him.

“Nice…”

Alpha Zero.

That old soldier licked his cracked lips.

“Alpha Team, Bravo Team, Charlie Team, and Delta Team. Alpha Zero has visually confirmed the enemy. This one’s the real deal. I’m sure you’re sick of killing each other over and over within the Underworld in the name of combat training, so rejoice! Our war has returned!!”

A moment later, they responded in a way unthinkable for highly-trained soldiers.

They took an action that was entirely divorced from logic and efficiency.

Wham!!!!!

The crowd of ghosts stomped their feet as one, as if to further shake the entire half-destroyed inn town. They showed the world the excitement overflowing from their chests, just like the moment of a decisive goal in an international soccer match.

Sutriona and Kallikantzaros grimaced while standing back to back on a partially-crumbled roof.

“Talk about a cheerful insanity…!!”

“Are they the ones known as the Stars and Stripes? As the grave keeper for the former Soviets, Ileana would probably know more about those monsters from the Cold War.”

“I’m starting to think it was a mistake getting rid of those perverts like Gullveig and Flame Bubble. We could always slap them awake again…”

“Those perverts wouldn’t be any use regardless.”

The Vampire sounded exasperated as her red negligee was pushed out by quite a large chest for her small frame.

A few historic failures had occurred in Ground’s Nir. Examples included the Next Voyager, an overseas exploration ship built by North America’s strongest, and the Enter Kosmos, a giant Labyrinth-fixation stake built by Eurasia’s strongest. Based on what they had seen of these opponents, the Underworld could only collect and use the spirits of the dead who had lost their lives in this alternate world, but that also meant that those born on earth could be controlled if they died here.

The present was peaceful when compared to an extremely unstable time when any little thing could have led to the destruction of an entire planet. If all of the dead who had used this alternate world had become the Underworld’s troops, then the nature of these old soldiers became something truly abnormal.

“…go…”

Fighting them had to be avoided.

But now that they had set foot on the island, there was no avoiding contact.

“Let go! I’m going to help Boo Boo fight!! If they really are Elkiad in their prime, then they know how to fight Iberian Orcs! I can’t let him do this on his own!!”

But when Sutriona heard that voice, she glanced toward the predawn inn town once more.

The usual group was having an argument.

“Shut up, Beatrice. We have to get to the Gates! You heard what Inoue said, right? The humans are settling on retreating. We need to survive this!!”

“W-Wildefrau, please help me!”

“I suppose I have no choice, But if you don’t take her Shining Weapon first, I’ll be roasted!”

She saw Beatrice being dragged away while half-restrained by a girl with curly blue hair. Then she shifted her gaze to Boo Boo who was forming a one-man vanguard as he charged toward the ghosts. That was when the Fairy Queen understood.

The old soldiers had heard the girls’ voices too, but the Iberian Orc would not let them move in that direction. And that was while he fought all alone against such a great army.

“That scaredy-cat is acting tough despite his fear of ghosts.”

“Well, Ground’s Nir’s issues are our issues. The humans have no obligation to help out.”

After jumping down from the roof, the Fairy and Vampire paradoxes landed on either side of Boo Boo.

They did not see this as being left behind. This was their world.

Thus, the Break News girls remained entirely arrogant as they spoke.

“Stay focused, Boo Boo. Let’s buy them some time by pushing these guys back!”

“If you feel like complaining, I’ll lend you some strength…with a bite from these fangs. If you don’t want that, then show me you’re a man.”

Part 3

Beatrice was jostled about.

Her vision shook horribly.

As Boo Boo’s back grew smaller, he looked back toward them just once.

He did not speak a single word of resentment even when he saw them running away.

Leave it to me.

His powerful gaze spoke those words quite clearly before he rushed toward the fierce warriors once more.

And soon thereafter, red-armored and miniskirted Holy Swordswoman Beatrice returned home.

As did many other surviving humans. As if they were pulling back some kind of line.

Part 4

The Ushigashira Shrine in Akasaka, Tokyo.

“…Phew.”

A college girl with long and fluffy blonde hair and coke bottle glasses breathed a heavy sigh that caused the chest of her shrine maiden outfit to rise and fall. She did not feel like watching TV and she definitely did not feel like checking the internet which was far less restrained and had no broadcast

rules to follow.

A day and night had passed since then.

The flow of information around the world could change in countless ways given 24 hours. She had once obsessively checked social media in fear of being left behind by those around her, but now her view was the exact opposite. She could not deny that she wanted to be left behind by the situation that was worsening at an accelerated rate.

“Yahh!!”

“I’ll be the Magic Swordswoman this time! I’ll make my sword shock you!”

“Yeah, but I’ll summon a monster. Come forth, Thunder Wyvern! Roar!!”

Young soprano voices could be heard from the neatly-laid gravel of the shrine grounds. When the college girl looked out from the shrine’s corridor, she saw small girls with similar blonde hair and shrine maiden outfits swinging bamboo brooms around to mimic a swordfight. Just as they didn’t pay any attention to National Diet broadcasts or international conferences, they had no interest in the emergency broadcasts on that dying medium of TV. They were mostly just innocently happy that school had been canceled.

Ignorance was an anesthetic. But the calm it promised you was the most dangerous one imaginable.

Unaware how much sex appeal she was scattering around,

the glasses shrine maiden honestly wanted to go back.

The children were throwing a soccer ball back and forth, probably pretending it was a Magic projectile. Eventually, it rolled over to the college girl's feet.

"Onee-chaaan."

"Yes, yes, you cute little things. You can have fun, but don't forget that this is our god's house."

"Big Nee-chan! You play with us, too!"

"I'm too busy for that."

"Ehh? But I want to play with you, Big Boobs Nee-chan."

"Okay, that's it. Let's take this out back, you brat."

The swirly glasses shrine maiden crouched down, picked up the ball, and lightly threw it at the children.

But it slipped from her hand and somehow flew at an unbelievably sharp angle from the intended one. It broke right through one of the shrine's sliding doors.

"…"

"…"

"…Ahh. Onee-chan…"

That pure look of disappointment was too painful.

Then a follow-up attack hit the trembling swirly glasses girl.

An exasperated old lady's voice called out to her from above the long passageway.

"What are you going to do, Shrine Maiden Princess?"

"Apologize like crazy to mom and dad! What else can I do!?"

"Not about that."

The swirly glasses girl sighed again and again at the old lady voice from the corridor ceiling. The information she did not want to see was everywhere. When the smartphone hidden in her cleavage buzzed briefly, she grabbed it out of habit and saw pointless entertainment news sent to the mail service by the cell service company.

That service was focused on the entertainment and sports industries, but even its articles were bizarre.

"Special report!! What is the Underworld? Information from several sources leads to a shocking prediction."

"The alert level rises to red for the first time. The government is asking that everyone refrains from Signing In to the other world."

"What will happen to the Tokyo market with no more Pieces from Ground's Nir to help with pharmaceutical development?"

She felt like someone had lined up a heavy meal full of meat

and fat first thing in the morning when she was hungover. She did not want to click the “read more” button for any of them. She noticed stomach acid rising in her throat, so she calmly regulated her breathing.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs just requested that everyone refrain from Signing In to Ground’s Nir, right? There is no way of opposing the Underworld. Sporadic attempts will only increase the army of the dead’s numbers and increase the overall difficulty level. So they’re saying not to make any careless attempts until they find a more drastic solution.”

She was not as obsessive a note-taker as the red-and-silver-haired Holy Swordswoman, but she still gathered the intersecting information in her smartphone’s “to do” section:

- Boo Boo and Beatrice met in Ground’s Nir.
- Boo Boo’s village was destroyed by Elkiad, a Guild of former soldiers.
- During their prime, Elkiad joined forces with the Sage and destroyed the village.
- The Sage looks exactly like Beatrice.
- The Sage had gathered pawns like Sibyl and Disaster in order to defeat Abyss, the monster at the Labyrinth’s bottom level who would bring about Ground’s Nir’s destruction.
- Abyss herself was developed to defeat the Underworld Lord, the enemy of all life.
- And now that Abyss has been defeated, nothing remains

to stop the Underworld, so it rose up onto Ground's Nir's coastline and attacked.

- The Underworld's forces are extraordinary in both quality and quantity, so it is predicted that not even several Break News would be able to stop them.

The blonde glasses shrine maiden breathed a heavy sigh without thinking.

No matter how much information she gathered, there was nothing she could actually do.

"Did you want me to say that might be fine for the humans born on earth?" asked the old lady voice.

"?"

"You understand, don't you? Abandoning that other world is not going to leave human society perfectly safe."

…That was right.

The modern world was supported by people using Experience Points to learn Magic and then producing the Pieces that brought about technological revolutions. The cutting-edge fields like pharmaceutical development and AI research would apparently request patents in advance when a large simulator predicted the production of a Piece. If all of those gears jammed up, just how badly would it affect the world economy? Given the number of people who would lose their jobs, it could even lead to desperate riots or wars.

“I wasn’t talking about that.”

But the attic voice scoffed at the college girl’s melancholy.

She then directly stated what she meant.

“How long are you going to watch this like it’s just something on TV? What makes you so certain that their deadly fingertips can’t directly reach you?”

“Eh…?”

“The Underworld has already seen all the fresh souls that have come from earth. So will they give up just because you’ve retreated through the Gates? It would only be natural to try to reach into that den and make a mess of things. Who can say for sure that they don’t intend to conquer absolutely everything?”

A tiny private detective agency in Shinjuku, Tokyo.

“P-please tell me you’re kidding!!”

He must have superstitiously thought he could not report this even over a “secure line”. The young man had directly walked all the way here and the young woman he referred to as “chief” sat up from her cheap office chair.

“The government gets to decide which Gates will be frozen? Are they trying to unilaterally restrict the operations of civilian companies!? I thought this was a capitalist nation that

promised a free economy for everyone!”

Using obscure language was one of their old tricks, but they could not fully hide what they were doing here. Given the influence that Pieces had on the world, this was worse than freezing individual bank accounts at the click of a mouse. The corporations and investors who did not cooperate with the authorities would be immediately brought to ruin and tens of thousands of employees would be thrown out to wander the streets. It would be odd if this did not lead to riots.

“Don’t snap at me. I’m just telling you what the higher ups decided.”

Inoue raised his hands as if he were at a complete loss.

“This is apparently based on a result found using one of those grand simulators that may or may not actually exist. Y’know, like Maxwell or the National Diet’s subway station underground shelter. If things continue as is, the Underworld will reach the Gates located in Ground’s Nir.”

“Wait, you don’t mean…?”

“If they perform a cyber attack on the Gates and successfully infiltrate the system, the Underworld’s dead could come to play on earth just like we were playing in Ground’s Nir. Given the existence of the giant armory and of Abyss, we’ve seen hints that they have more than just Magic there. They apparently have some kind of complex data-processing system that exceeds even earth’s technology. So the higher ups want to seal up those entrances before that happens. …If

possible, they want to blow up all of the Gates from the earth side, but they're not sure they can go that far given the economic effects."

They had been pushed back in Ground's Nir where they had full use of Magic, so what would happen if they were forced to fight those veteran dead without that advantage? They would be no more than a group of raw eggs lined up on the ground waiting to be trampled underfoot.

It reminded them of the commotion caused by Demon Lord Tselika.

But this was would be an army instead of an individual and their objective would be pure, unadulterated slaughter. Given that, the threat this time would be even greater.

"…Hey, Inoue."

But the glasses beauty he called "chief" was not just worried about that.

"That's easy enough to say, but how many Gates do you think there are in this world?"

"Umm, based on the data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 68,079 have been officially registered. Although they are not evenly distributed, so they are concentrated in developed nations."

"Yes, but that's only the official number. It's entirely based on what people were willing to declare. Declare, that is, to this country that everyone tends to take lightly." She held her

head. “There are Gates protected by their governments like the one in the Detached Magic Palace and there are Gates that are hidden from the higher ups like ours. Given the economic effects, it’s almost guaranteed that some people will refuse to freeze theirs and instead keep it hidden. And the fewer there are, the greater their value will be. If hiding it will only benefit them, they’ll never cooperate and there are bound to be holes left open!!”

And if the dead entered through even a single opening, the world was doomed.

Even at times like this, she doubted the human race could put aside its internal problems.

“B-but it’s impossible to know where every last Gate is. This involves all kinds of countries and other powers: capitalist nations, socialist nations, religious states, IT corporations, and even criminal organizations and secret societies.”

“…”

“To pull it off, you’d have to be the Sage who was involved in it all from the beginning and had control of every last part of it…”

And the Detached Magic Palace in Roppongi, Tokyo.

“More and more of those in Ground’s Nir are returning through Gates around the world, but experts say the travel restriction from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be

extended…”

“An ominous atmosphere hangs over Tokyo. It was only recently that Demon Lord Tselika caused a disaster here, but the Metropolitan Police Department’s tension has already exceeded what it was during that incident…”

“…”

The flat-screen TV was too large for a personal residence and yet it was arranged perfectly so it did not clash with the room’s interior. While listening to the chatter from its speakers, a girl with a red dress and long black twintails was still lying in bed despite the sun having risen high into the sky. If she was this lazy under normal circumstances, Iroka, eldest of the three maid sisters, would have let her glasses shine while mercilessly spanking her master.

But things were different now.

“P-please wait! There is no causal relationship between the Detached Magic Palace and the Sage. Do you not remember me reporting that!?”

“You’re willing to lock her up…? Are you serious!? Have you forgotten how much the lady has done for our country at the risk of her own life!?”

“What a pain. It doesn’t sound like you want to solve this at all. It sounds more like you just want a convenient scapegoat.”

The mansion had decent soundproofing, but she could still

hear the maids' voices from the hallway. The girl was the one on the chopping block, but she just lay in bed as if she had lost the spring needed to move her body.

(Oh, I get it. The Detached Magic Palace was always meant as a cage for that purpose, wasn't it?)

It belatedly hit her. She had no idea how many members of Japan's government had known what the Sage looked like long ago, but if they had seen her, then the girl's own treatment made sense.

But it didn't matter.

There was only one thing in the red dress girl's heart.

(Boo Boo…)

She recalled the moment before leaving.

Had there really been nothing she could have done? Her Party members had taken her Shining Weapon in a surprise attack, preventing her from using Magic, and they had worked as a group to pick her up and take her to her Gate. But again: had there really been nothing she could have done? She had wanted to stay until the very last moment, but there had been no choice but to leave. Hadn't she had that excuse shoved onto her and then grabbed her Shining Weapon again to Sign Out?

Boo Boo had said nothing to that weak girl.

He had looked back just once and then charged back into the

swarming dead as if to say he would buy them enough time to return.

What could she do now?

No, what did she really want to do?

“Sigh…”

She breathed a heavy sigh.

And just then, she heard a quiet but solid sound.

It came from the window.

Part 5

The sun had risen high in the sky.

Boo Boo and the others had been extremely worn down after constant fighting for more than a day and a night without rest. Meanwhile, the ghosts were already dead, so they did not have to worry about stamina and health. Boo Boo and Sutriona’s fierce attacks had supplied fatal blows to a few of the veteran soldiers, but…

“Heh heh. Looks like this is it for me, sergeant.”

“Go get some rest, Bravo Two. Wait in the Underworld until you’re resurrected!”

“I’m jealous. We’ll be with you soon!!”

They no longer feared what came after death.

Their dead souls were retrieved and sent back to the Underworld, so killing them did not whittle down their numbers. After a short break, they would resume the attack.

Something fluttered through the air.

They were the palm-sized Fairies named Meridiana and Alice. They were complexly dancing about in the sky. They skillfully used their thin wings to reflect the sunlight or moonlight. By combining that with acrobatic flying, they could send a flashing signal across long distances.

“#3, #5, and #8, please continue as planned. #4 and #9, add in a one beat delay.”

“Create a slight time delay so any we miss are smashed to smithereens. Fiiiire!!”

Something fell from the sky.

The Fairies specialized in Craft skills and they had built the catapults lined up in the distant forest. They were essentially large seesaws that launched stones. Since they had their own wings, the gunners could maintain an elevated vantage point not trapped by the horizon and the scouts on the front line could reflect the sunlight on their thin wings to send a signal

back to the gunners. That allowed for very accurate long-range fire.

Boulders taller than a human and wooden barrels full of gunpowder rained down and collided with the dead while breaking through the walls and roofs of the buildings that were barely recognizable anymore.

Meridiana and Alice's dangerous job was similar to the observers who blended into the front line and guided aerial bombings with a laser. Fairies were small and at the bottom of the food chain, but that small size also made them hard to hit, allowing them to persistently stick around. The only exceptions were things like Ground Spiders that had special sensory organs and could attack a full surface using their webs.

But even that was not enough.

The enemy's numbers were simply too great.

"Ugegeh! Meridiana, retreat! Retreat into the sky!!"

"Alice!! If we don't tell them where to fire, those catapults will go to waste…"

"Those spider web things are approaching!!"

Meridiana was more or less dragged into the sky by her little sister as something dark filled the half-destroyed and dust-filled inn town. It was like watching the waxing and waning of the moon in fast forward and it was of course caused by the Underworld. The clockwork mechanisms looked like a fusion

of a spider and a crab and they stood taller than a human. They spat out sinister threads, built up more and more tunnel webs, and rapidly expanded the Black Labyrinth.

“Those mechanisms… Aren’t those Arachnes? But why are they working for the other side!?”

It was like having the entire island infected with a mysterious deadly disease. At this rate, it was only a matter of time before the entire inn town was swallowed up.

The Black Labyrinth created a lot of blind spots and dead ends and the narrow pathways were a poor environment for wielding large weapons. If the Nonhumans fighting on the surface were caught in this, it was all over. A suicide attack on the army of the dead would not stop them.

“Wh-what do we do? If we don’t push them back soon, everyone is done for…!!”

“Wait.” Elder Morgan joined them while flying at the same height. “We are acting as their eyes and ears, so if we rush things and get shot down, it truly is over. The catapults are undeniably effective. Let us narrow down our targets and support Sir Boo Boo, Lady Sutriona, and the others. Do not get caught up in the struggle over territory. We need to crush the Black Labyrinth, secure freedom of movement, and maintain an escape route for the others. We must not allow them to be isolated!!”

Meanwhile, the hell on the surface was further rewriting the familiar scenery with each passing moment.

“S-squeal…”

Boo Boo held his giant Shining Weapon that looked like a log or steel beam and even he could not keep his shoulders from rising and falling. He did not have it in him to consciously regulate his breathing.

It all came down to the time of day.

In this case, daytime.

That naturally created a large imbalance in the fight between Boo Boo’s group and the Underworld’s dead near Ground’s Nir’s inn town.

Specifically…

“Tch!! Has that sleepyhead Kallikantzaros still not recovered!?”

Sutriona, the Fairy Queen in a black ribbon dress with large flower decorations added here and there, clicked her tongue while standing back to back with Boo Boo.

Yes, Vampires were weak to sunlight.

That meant they could only participate in the fighting for half of the day and, since this Vampire had the extraordinary power of a Break News, her absence greatly affected the power balance.

(On the other hand, that perverted carrot is stronger during the day because she can absorb nutrients from the soil and

use photosynthesis to multiply endlessly.)

Sutriona glanced over, but then she grimaced.

Ileana, peak of the plant Break News, was definitely participating in the battle.

But her belly was torn through with an assault rifle's bayonet.

Of course, she was one of the paradoxes and a simple head-on attack like that was unlikely to defeat her. Even if she was taking advantage of her endless reproduction by diving into the countless connected tunnels of the dangerous Black Labyrinth to check for soldiers lying in ambush.

There had to be some other reason she had grown so careless in this open plaza.

"A-ahh… Why, why…?"

"Krasnaya to Sinyanov, Target 1 has been destroyed."

"You've joined that side!? What happened to your former morals…ghh. No, and I so loved your smiles of pure joy after you searched for sunflowers in this world and eventually found seeds with a similar feel when you chewed them. And now you're working for the Underworld…!?"

"Target 1 has multiplied. Comrades, individual fire is ineffective. I request a volley of defoliant and incendiary rounds from our rocket system. I predict contaminating and destroying the connected water source will be effective."

(Has she been thrown off her game after running across some old acquaintances!?)

As a plant that grew in groups, her main soul fortunately did not die even when each individual was destroyed. She was not stolen as a game piece. But their situation was only going to grow worse. Could they outlast until the next sunset?

“I will release you. Ahhhh, ahhhh

the advantage the sun gave them.

A short distance away, Alpha Zero chuckled in a mixture of joy at having a concrete chance at victory and sadness at knowing it was going to end so soon.

“Now then. Let’s settle this before the next sunset.”

“You claim to be berserkers, but you aren’t even going to consider continuing to fight through the night?”

“It’s true this feels more than a little insufficient, but we want to engross ourselves in a true fight to the death. We don’t want some phony show. When victory is within reach, we’ll take it.”

(It doesn’t sound like they’re being forced to obey because someone is threatening the lifeline that binds them to their temporary spectral form. So would they go on a rampage even without instructions from this lord of theirs?)

The giant spider-crab fusions had already advanced into the inn town. The black threads they spewed out wove complexly together and constructed a tunnel-shaped labyrinth which ran in every possible direction. This was an invasion trench battle that overturned the basic assumptions of war. These were offensive positions, not defensive ones. This enemy was formidable enough as it was, but they also remade the terrain to take away any geographical advantages.

Of course, Boo Boo and the others did not just sit idly by as the situation accelerated toward ruin.

Sutriona had had a reason for opening her mouth and stalling for time.

The Fairies' catapults seemed lacking in power, but an attack from overhead had proved effective.

While circling through the sky, the Thousand Dragon began a second aerial bombing. Her target was of course the old soldiers, but even if she failed to finish them off, tearing apart the complexly interwoven Black Labyrinth and eliminating those phantom trenches would have a major effect.

Or it should have.

However.

Something else moved alongside her.

A giant flying dragon appeared from the thick clouds and targeted the Thousand Dragon with its brutal jaws.

The Thousand Dragon was longer than 1000m using human units, but even she felt a squeezing at her heart when she saw this. Her mind went blank and she could not even respond to the cries of Fairy Elder Morgan who flew nearby.

"Wha-…?"

It was a giant dragon covered in silver armor.

The Thousand Dragon did not even have time to raise her voice in protest against the unreasonable sight before her eyes.

A thick, orange-glowing beam of heat – no, it was technically some kind of metal heated until it liquefied – struck the black dragon on the stomach.

“Kyahh!?”

“She…she could have dodged that, but she protected us instead?”

The attack had been made at extreme close range. The pain of the cruel dragon breath was so great that the Thousand Dragon could not help but twist her body around. The stable cloud movements were thrown out of order and the aerial bombing strayed off course.

But what was that?

Had the Underworld acquired a Dragon soul and remade it into its pawn? The black dragon clacked her teeth together in pain while guiding this enemy to a new airspace where the small Fairies would not be at risk, but then she heard some odd voices.

“…Found you.”

“Found you, found you, found you.”

“…Fooouuund yooouuu…”

They did not belong to a dragon.

Those lovelier, higher-pitched, and maledictory voices belonged to young girls.

At first, the Thousand Dragon thought the formless hallucinations had returned. But that was not the case. The silver armor was folded together at the flame dragon's jaws, but it now opened up like double doors and small figures appeared from within, as if they had been hiding under blankets and behind trees.

Yes, it was them.

Those palm-sized girls were…

"Fairies…!?"

If any lives lost in Ground's Nir were captured by the Underworld, this had been inevitable. The many poor lives that the wicked dragon had devoured had sharpened the blade of revenge and returned to the Thousand Dragon.

And as Fairies specialized in Craft skills, they had brought a clockwork dragon with them…!!

"Why are you standing on the side of the heroes?"

"We could have accepted it if we were all wiped out as sacrifices. We could have accepted it if there was simply no saving us."

"But why did you stop? What purpose did our sacrifices have now?"

The all spoke at once.

There was no sign of their former selves.

But it was the Thousand Dragon herself who had robbed that from them.

“Die.”

“Begone.”

“Join us in hell!!”

The situation was underway on the surface as well.

With the aerial support lost, Boo Boo, Sutriona, and the others had lost their chance for a counterattack and the old soldiers of Elkiad rushed in toward them to attack. Some used Magic, some used bullets, and some used a combination of the two. The fierce attack was like a horizontal downpour, so Boo Boo and Sutriona briefly split up and took shelter on the roofs of different crumbling buildings. They of course stayed out of range of the Black Labyrinth as it was created from countless threads.

The scenery was being overwritten and almost the entire inn town had been swallowed up at this point.

If they had not gotten up on the roofs, they would have been driven into a deadly maze full of countless blind spots and dead ends.

“Arachnes. I thought I’d seen them before, but now it makes sense…”

Sutriona had finally grasped the situation.

Those contraptions were creating the Black Labyrinth in the blink of an eye and one group of the dead specialized in Craft skills.

The bellies of the spider-crab fusions opened up.

Just like a crab carrying its eggs, they were filled with countless girls who were small enough to fit on a human's palm and had thin insect wings on their backs.

"Did you mess with their souls to amplify their hatred? You have guts laying a hand on my subjects without my permission, Underworld!!"

But the Queen's words of righteous anger did not reach the Fairies.

Their souls were literally bound.

"What makes you so great? You call yourself our Queen, but you couldn't save us. And we trusted in your protection…"

"We died. Hey, we died and we can never get anything we had back!!"

"The same crime deserves the same punishment, right? Then die. Quit acting like you deserve to live and pay for what you let happen to uuuu

Those voices may have been a greater curse than any direct attack.

Fairies had little offensive power, so there had been no need for them to emerge from within the contraptions. But they gained an advantage by shaking Sutriona's heart and stopping her for even a short time.

And as proof…

"That was a mistake."

By the time the Fairy Queen heard the dull sound, the old soldier known as Alpha Zero had already kicked off the wall and climbed atop the roof to which she had fled. She was now within range of his double-edged longsword. Even if she quickly jumped back, his heavy machinegun would shoot her down before she could regain her balance.

"You lost your purity of mind in the middle of a thrilling battle! Distracted driving is a good way to get yourself killed! Toh!!"

"!?"

Her slender shoulders gave a start, but her toxic wings could not physically stop the silver flash.

But then something happened.

She heard a dull sound and Alpha Zero's body blurred before her eyes. His longsword drastically changed course and knocked down something flying in from the side.

It was a piece of rubble about the size of a human head.

While standing on the crumbling roof across the narrow road, Boo Boo had lightly tossed up a piece of rubble, made a full swing of his massive Shining Weapon, and launched it like an artillery shell.

And of course, he did not stop there.

He did not hesitate to launch his nearly 4m body.

He had made his opponent stop the rubble shell to hold the old soldier in place with the knockback. In the instant Alpha Zero flinched, he could not use his Magic or his heavy machinegun. Boo Boo used that moment to move in and launch his true, meteoric attack toward the old soldier's head.

Another silver flash flipped around.

Alpha Zero crossed his longsword and heavy machinegun and stopped Boo Boo's full strength from head on.

Frighteningly enough, his old bones alone were enough to equal the Iberian Orc.

But their crumbling footing sank deep down and both Boo Boo and Alpha Zero fell into the building, leaving only the slender girl on the roof. Floor after floor was broken through as they continued all the way down to the ground.

They were covered by the ceiling of the Black Labyrinth woven from countless black threads. But that disadvantage did not matter at the moment. They locked their Shining

Weapons together and Boo Boo spoke in a low voice while pressing his weight down on his opponent.

“I will not forgive you.”

“Ha ha ha!! No need. We didn’t want a joint military exercise where we fire gun salutes at each other. Nor did we want an acrobatic air show with no chance of detecting an enemy radar. …This is the real deal. More than lead bullets and steel blades, you need to kill each other with real emotion!!”

“What are you hoping to accomplish by hurting everyone so much!?”

“We were jealous of you all from the bottoms of our hearts.”

He was pinned between the broken floor and his opponent’s giant body, but the old soldier actually looked entranced.

“We couldn’t bear to watch the Cold War shrink and fizzle out. We weren’t given a chance to use all the power we were dying to use, so it just sat there and rotted! …But this is another world entirely. No matter how wildly we fight and no matter how much destruction we cause, we can’t wipe out the human race on earth. See? How could there be a more wonderful hell!? Search all you want; you’ll never find a more colorful heaven than this!!”

“I don’t understand…”

“We want to fight until the bitter end. We don’t care what that end is; we just want to use every last thing at our disposal.”

Was the light in his eyes that of a berserker?

Or was it that of a gambler who was willing to place his own life on the table.

“We don’t care about nuclear war between America and the Soviets. We’re sick of only being sent to battlefields that are prearranged to not change anything in the big picture. That’s all Vietnam was in the end and we couldn’t bring an end to the white powder in Central and South America. It was all a compromise someone else decided on. The undefeated and strongest army wasn’t allowed to actually fight because it would cause too many people too many problems if it ever was defeated. But the boots on the ground didn’t give a shit about any of that. We wanted an even fight. We wanted both sides to use everything at their disposal and to fight it out until one side emerged victorious. That was all. That was all it was, Iberian Orc!!”

Boo Boo sensed a frightening surge.

The old soldier was nearly pinned down, but he pressed the bottom of his feet against Boo Boo’s belly and used his incredible leg strength to toss the Iberian Orc into the air. Free once more, Alpha Zero’s arms blurred. The Shining Weapon in his right fired lightning Magic and the heavy machinegun in his left fired lead bullets. Boo Boo had no footing in midair as those projectiles mercilessly targeted him.

“I’m jealous! So very jealous!!”

“!!”

Just as Alpha Zero fired, Boo Boo twisted his body and slammed his Shining Weapon into the floor. The reactionary force pushed him a little bit higher into the air. He just barely avoided the storm of transforming bullets wrapped in electricity.

The crazed old soldier was smiling as he got up from the broken floor.

“You see, when I saw that village lying in ruins after using its full strength against us, I couldn’t help but feel jealous that they managed to enjoy the taste of true ruin.”

“You…”

“Yes, I am even jealous of your hatred! Even our Magic is managed by our Shining Weapons, so we can only digitally plan out our victory. Those raw feelings are something we cannot experience. Yes, yes. But now we might be able to be defeated and destroyed. We might be able to fight a battle that truly stings!!”

Alpha Zero then whispered “so” while slowly raising his sword and gun combo once more.

He was not done yet.

“Allow me to remove another of the unnecessary bonds preventing you from fighting without reservation.”

“There’s more?”

“Oh, yes. The Underworld ordered us onto the island in order

to reach the Gates the humans use. Because with a little bit of fiddling, we can reach through to the other side."

"…"

"I don't know if it would work for souls born in Ground's Nir, but our souls are products of earth. Even in this state, we might be able to pass through the human Gates if the conditions are right. And you know what happens then, don't you? The humans of earth will no longer matter. Everyone you love will drown in a sea of blood."

That hopeless grin reminded Boo Boo of another scene.

He recalled that moment when he had been left utterly alone. When the village that had always been there had become a pile of rubble covered in blood and smoke.

The same thing would happen again.

And this time it would happen to the safe "village" where Beatrice and the others lived. From what he had heard, they had different problems there, but they said that world was not ruled by survival of the fittest and they did not have to hunt to eat. And this enemy said this destruction would be brought to the home of those girls who had filled his heart with so much warmth.

The last of the Iberian Orcs gave a roar.

He gave no thought to his overall disadvantage here.

"You!!"

“Come, real one!! The analysis needed to take control of the many Gates is underway. Now, treat us to a true battle that directly wears at each other’s souls, where neither side shows compromise, and where one side tastes utter ruin!!!!!”

Part 6

Hearing something tapping against the glass, the red dress girl approached the window and saw two unexpected faces there.

“Armelina and Filinion…?”

“It must be chaos for the higher ups too. We’d never normally be able to infiltrate the Detached Magic Palace.”

“A-anyway, please let us in.”

That glasses duo was clinging to the wall and entered through the window. One was a college girl shrine maiden and the other was a police officer. They were also the Level Cappers the red dress girl regularly entrusted her life to in Ground’s Nir.

“Why are you here…?”

“We’re here to save you.” The tight skirt woman sounded exasperated. “Do you have any idea what your situation is

here? The authorities have no way stopping the Underworld, so they've pulled everyone out of Ground's Nir and they're abandoning all the Gates. The fingers of death are approaching. It won't be a problem if their cyber attack fails, but we've lost from the moment that they're the ones that control the success or failure of their invasion. Tselika's attack is going to seem like nothing in comparison."

"…"

"And – as usual – the government has just given up on thinking and they've started treating the Underworld's invasion like an unavoidable disaster. Well, that might have been the end of it if they didn't need a target to absorb the hate, but they're starting to secure a scapegoat to blame if the people riot after overcoming the sea of blood. And they've chosen the person who brought Magic to this world: the Sage. So if people won't accept it as a natural disaster, they'll call it a manmade disaster. Because that will redirect the people's hatred away from them."

"But no one knows what happened to the Sage after we defeated her."

"That means they'll use the person with the closest connection to the Sage. Just like how the garbage media loves attacking the families of criminals. Beatrice, you're at the most risk here. It's possible they'll even pass you off as the Sage herself to place all the resentment on you."

It was absurd, but actual cause and effect rarely came into play when the masses were looking for an outlet for their

stress. Had there been no contradictions whatsoever in the old witch hunts? As long as there was some semblance of logic, people were willing to turn a blind eye to some inconvenient facts. The search for peace of mind could be frightening indeed when the masses fell into a state of panic.

The red dress girl sat on her own bed.

“For now, I’ll hear you out.”

“How can you stay so calm?” protested the shrine maiden. “You’re about to be arrested for a crime you didn’t commit…!”

“There is one way to escape the uniformed police officers and break free of this situation.” The tight skirt beauty crossed her arms and raised her index finger. “We return to Ground’s Nir once more. And we do something about the Underworld on our own. That’s the only way.”

The authorities wanted a scapegoat in case they could not stop the Underworld’s invasion and a great many people on earth were lost as a result. So they would no longer need that makeshift sacrifice if there was no invasion.

“I have no idea if we have any chance of success. But Boo Boo and the Break News have to still be fighting. That island is their only home, so we need to hurry. The situation will only worsen each time a powerful Break News is killed and joins the Underworld’s side.”

“…”

“Beatrice, you can’t just leave Boo Boo there, can you? We forcibly dragged you to your Gate before, but things have changed. We have to assume our last chance is in Ground’s Nir.”

“…”

She should have leapt at the chance.

She normally would have.

But the red dress girl quietly bit her lip.

“…Do I really have the right to do that?”

“This isn’t about rights! Don’t you understand the authorities are going to execute you for their own-….!?”

“But!! All I did was cause everyone problems!!”

The dress girl cut off the tight skirt beauty with a hysteric cry.

“Elkiad, Demon Lord Tselika, the Sage, and Abyss… I obeyed my own sense of justice and worked so hard each time, but all I ultimately did was give the Underworld Lord more momentum!! All of this is my fault, isn’t it!?”

“Wh-what are you talking about? Whether Abyss herself was good or evil, Ground’s Nir would have been destroyed if we hadn’t stopped her then, right?”

“And Boo Boo!! If he hadn’t been thinking about us humans, he might have been able to start fighting from a more

advantageous position. No, if the Nonhumans had offered up the Gates and let the Underworld focus on earth, they all might have been spared!!”

But instead, they had been hit by a surprise attack and attempted a head-on battle without time to regroup.

And all so the humans could escape to safety after selfishly giving up on that other world.

“And what about you two!? No, and Haruka, Misoka, and Iroka too… It’s easy enough for me to pass through my Gate, but who will be blamed for that afterwards!? In the end…in the end I can’t gain freedom without someone else taking the blame! Every time I do anything, someone else suffers for it!!”

If that girl asked for it, the people watching over her might have gladly agreed.

She only needed to say that she wanted to save Boo Boo or that she wanted to escape punishment for falsely accused crimes.

“…This is all my fault.”

Because those requests made sense, they might have felt the need to respond with a smile no matter how painful it really was.

“Are you telling me to keep doing that!? Keep being the kind of garbage that has to throw everyone I care about into the engine as fuel to keep moving forward!?”

Was she really only a scapegoat?

If this was truly wrong, then wouldn't that red dress girl be the greatest villain? While living trapped in the Detached Magic Palace, using so many other lives as stepping stones, and selfishly surviving this long, hadn't she offered up more goats than anyone else?

Would she continue doing that?

Could she never change?

"You…"

Finally, the adults exploded at the worrying girl.

"How can you be so dense!? The one whose suffered the most for the benefit of others is you, Beatrice!!"

"How can you be so dense!? The one whose suffered the most for the benefit of others is you, Beatrice!!"

The red dress girl stared in confusion at the sudden outburst.

She did not seem to understand, which only pushed the college girl and police officer further past the critical point.

"You look like the Sage, so you might be the Sage. That mere guess was all it took to build this Detached Magic Palace, isolate you inside it, and cut you off from a girl's normal school life!! Can you seriously say you're the one causing people trouble, Beatrice!?"

“The Sage used you and the authorities were so afraid of the Sage and didn’t know what to do about her that you ended falling through the cracks! You were shoved down there all on your own!! So complain about that!! You had your freedom taken from you during your precious, once-in-a-lifetime teenage years for some vague jinx about social stability and a trump card against the Sage that they didn’t even know would work. It’s the police officers like me who should have rescued you from that, but all I did was sit idly by and laugh! Why aren’t you criticizing me for that!? Do you not understand your rights here!?”

“Eh? But…”

The baffled dress girl probably had not caught on.

Even if she saw a delicious-looking cake in front of her, she would never think there was a slice for her. She would watch the cake rot and wonder why no one was eating it.

That was why the shrine maiden and police officer were so angry.

No, it was not just them. The people meant to manage the Detached Magic Palace which had been built by the government – that is, the three maid sisters who were considered public servants – had gone beyond their official duties and were even now acting as a breakwater to hold back all sorts of pressure.

They wanted her to have the same rights as any other person.

And if that was too much to ask for, they at least wanted her to complain about each of the normal things that had been taken from her.

That was their hope.

“To hell with this, Beatrice,” said the police officer. “What do you really want to do? Do you think hesitating, letting yourself rot here, and accepting your fate will lead to a happy ending full of smiles? Do you think that won’t trouble anyone? Do you seriously think that, you damn brat!? You might see us as a symbol of lame resignation, but don’t take us adults lightly!!”

“I’ve seen your consistent behavior,” said the shrine maiden. “So can you really say it’s right to stay silent while Boo Boo is being tormented and harmed out of your reach!? Don’t hold back for anyone; just tell us what you really want to do!!”

The answer was obvious.

Abandoning someone she cared for was simply not an option. Nor did she want to collapse in a dramatic show of self-sacrifice. Letting the adults mess with her and bind her for their own purposes was out of the question. What did that girl hope for? She did not care if anyone called it silly or overly convenient. This was what she really hoped for.

“…That was my home.”

The red dress girl finally moved her lips.

A trembling voice escaped the hands covering her face.

“Ground’s Nir was my home. I wasn’t surrounded by walls there, I could freely walk through the inn town and the Labyrinth, I could buy what I wanted, and I could train my body. I never would have met either of you without that other world. And…and…”

Her voice sounded battered and rusted.

The gears she had not allowed to move for so very long were now moving.

“It was like a miracle that I even met Boo Boo! That never could have happened without breaking all the rules to connect earth to that other world!! I can’t just throw all that away now. Everything I am is contained there. Boo Boo seems to think I was looking after him, but it was the opposite. I! I could never have become who I am without meeting him!! I want to repay him for that. I don’t want it to end before I can do that. No, even that’s just an excuse. The reasons don’t matter anymore. I just…!!”

It was not about effectiveness.

It was not an issue of logic.

“I just…”

The blonde glasses college girl and the tight skirt beauty listened intently to her. It was not a bad feeling. No one was laying out the state of the world on the table. They had wanted a more fundamental and more primitive motivation that acted as the driving force behind someone’s soul. That

was all.

“I just want to be with Boo Boo…!!!!!”

The Underworld’s invasion and the fate of the earth were of secondary importance. Her priorities were thoroughly fixated on herself. It would not be good if that line of thinking led her to bet the fate of the human race on it, but clear relief appeared on the faces of the two listeners. They knew they had made it in time.

The adults lightly bumped their fists together and spoke to the weeping girl.

“Then we need to hurry, Beatrice.”

“Yes. Those maids of yours are impressive, but they can’t hold it back forever.”

That was when they heard thunderous footsteps in the hallway. It was highly doubtful they belonged to Haruka or the other maids. This was most likely the men in black here to seize their scapegoat.

“Speak of the devil… Anyway, hurry out the window! Your Gate is in the courtyard, right!?”

Luckily, this was a Western-style mansion that did not require removing one’s shoes at the entrance. The red dress girl was still wearing her outside shoes, so she immediately left through the window. None of the men in black had been sent to guard the gazebo jacuzzi. The Detached Magic Palace was a government building and they had to know where the Gate

was, so they must have concluded no one would be dumb enough to head back to Ground's Nir with the dangerous Underworld there.

They were either spotted out the window or with the cameras and sensors because several loud sounds of destruction could be heard inside the mansion.

"Haruka and the others…"

"There's no use worrying about them now. And how much you wanna bet those maids are smiling right now!?"

"If you're going to strike back against the authorities for jumping the gun here, you need to regain your freedom first. And that means Ground's Nir!!"

They reached the Gate in the courtyard.

But it would take several minutes for the Sign In process to complete. And those men in black were risking their lives to fulfill their orders, so it was unlikely they would just sit around and let it happen.

More importantly, this Gate could not transport just anyone. The college girl and the tight skirt woman had their own entrances elsewhere.

Only the red dress girl could escape to the other world from here.

So the other two turned their backs on the girl and stood in the pursuers' way.

The tight skirt and glasses woman spoke without looking back.

“I promise we’ll catch up to you. So go on ahead, Beatrice!!”

“Armelina, Filinion!”

“Don’t give us that look. When you arrive on the other side, you’ll be exposed to the fierce attacks of the Underworld. Don’t forget that you’re in the most danger here.”

There was no time to hesitate.

Each passing second had to be bought by wearing down the lives of the people she cared about. They were truly fighting with their heart’s blood. So no matter how much it tore into her heart, she could not stick around for any reason.

The twintail girl stuck a hardware key that resembled a USB stick into the smartphone hanging from her neck. She stood in the center of the Gate. The machine rapidly carried out the necessary Sign In process.

She could hear fierce fighting. She could not stop the situation before her eyes. The three maid sisters and the friends who had fought alongside her in the other world intended to act as her shield until she had escaped.

Those few minutes felt long.

So very, very long!!

Part 7

The current generation of Ground's Nir Abyss was an Experience Point multi-purpose Magic weapon shaped like a girl. She had lost an arm and taken critical damage to her neck in combat, but the physical pain was not a problem while in sleep mode.

And once freed from the bonds of reality, she could access all information within the island of Ground's Nir. She had effectively been repeatedly optimizing herself in the depths of the Labyrinth, so this was a world she was intimately familiar with – yes, to the point of being sick of it.

While lying wrapped in bandages in the attic of Boo Boo's brick house, Abyss accessed that world as if dreaming.

Since she had no physical body like this, it was wrong to say it filled her "vision". She overcame the concepts of direction and distance as a massive amount of information spread out within the conscious region of her mind as if the starry sky had been thrown into a kaleidoscope. This great sea would have brought fear rather than convenience to a normal life form.

Abyss's favorite images were the cave paintings left throughout the island.

They had originally been a high-level encrypted data medium

that the ancient humans had left in an analog form because there was a limit to the strength of numerical encryptions based in a signal of zeroes and ones, but that did not matter. These were the mimicked ones the Iberian Orcs had used to crudely record how they lived without realizing what the original code had been.

How did they share their happiness with others? These recordings explained how they would decorate the forest's trees with snacks and other food, form a circle around the trees, and dance.

The history of the Iberian Orcs was not all cheerful and they had often been treated unfairly or had what they built torn down. Nevertheless, these cave paintings contained no complaints about any of that. There were references to the island's land, sea, and sky being ruled by the Elves, Mermaids, and such and there were references to the three royal families possessing a unique treasure such as a circlet, a ring, or an earring, but there was no mention of those groups not protecting the Iberian Orcs.

Their cave paintings only contained happy things, fun things, things they were proud of, and praise of others.

That demonstrated the disposition of the Iberian Orcs. They were the species that had misread Abyss's existence and repeatedly invaded the depths of the Labyrinth to stop her completion, but she did not care about that anymore. She knew they were not bad people.

But Abyss's gentle time did not last forever.

The crude but heartwarming images left on the cave walls by the Iberian Orcs were carelessly blotted out and filled in by something dark.

Lifeless contraptions that looked like a fusion of a spider and a crab spewed out black thread and created a Black Labyrinth that resembled countless writhing tunnels.

Abyss shifted her attention away from the individual cave paintings and to the surrounding caves. Then she searched the entire island once more and found that about half of it was already covered in black.

The outside world she had longed for was being defiled.

She was filled with surprise and then displeasure as an odd sensation prickled the corners of her senses like needles.

From the perspective of humans who only had their five senses to rely on, it may have been like an alarm.

“Here is a suggestion based on Code E4C3320.”

The island of Ground’s Nir was effectively a giant armory made by the ancient humans to create the weapon named Abyss. The factory area of the underground structure had contacted her.

“48% of the surface has been invaded by enemy trenches and they continue to grow. Once 60% of the island is covered, it is estimated the creatures that appeared naturally on the surface will be unable to respond effectively. Once their resistance fails, the invasion will push through like an

avalanche. At that point, it is predicted the underground structure – that is, the armory itself – will be invaded."

"…"

That was indeed a problem.

The people Abyss knew very well would be affected. No, given the possibility of a cyber attack on the Gates prepared across the island, this was no longer limited to the island.

"The grid sensors installed across the island have confirmed an attack from the expected target: the Underworld. Ground's Nir Abyss is obligated to attack to fulfill the purpose of her creation. After accessing the armory, dismantling the facility, and reconstructing it all as armor and spare power, please swiftly take action to exterminate the Underworld."

"…"

But responding to the armory's request meant to sink the entire island, throw all life living there into the ocean, and using the foundation of their livelihoods to provide armor and weapons for a single girl.

That would not allow Abyss to protect anything she wanted to protect.

So there was only one answer.

"Rejection. Abyss abandons the physical fulfillment of her primary objective."

“Abyss lacks the effective authorization to refuse. The surface will be destroyed within eight hours. And that time table is currently being adjusted downwards, so please execute the command before it is too late.”

“Even so, rejection. Optimizing processor core, securing memory. Stand by for counter cyber attack.”

“Abyss’s self-analysis functionality has clearly taken severe damage. Temporarily removing privileges to ensure the continuation of this work task. Exterior options, all sections: parallel processing. Stand by for cyber attack.”

Another war had begun.

The current invasion rate was 48% and it would reach the point of no return at 60%.

To leave the fate of the remaining eight hours in the hands of those who still lived, Abyss poured all her might into a lonely war of which no one would ever learn.

Yes, just like the Iberian Orcs had once continually challenged the ultimate weapon over and over again to protect everyone on the island who had thrown stones at them.

Part 8

Not even Boo Boo knew what exactly caused it.

He might have relaxed just slightly when they managed to last almost until sunset. As night arrived, Vampire Kallikantzaros would soon return. And if they survived until then, the battle would shift in their favor again.

But he should not have forgotten that a life could be lost in an instant.

Even if hope was a minute or a second away, he had to use all his might to survive from moment to moment and continue walking toward the future or he would lose that path forward.

“Ah.”

Boo Boo did not do anything wrong.

But when the old Elkiad soldier known as Alpha Zero aimed his heavy machinegun toward Fairy Alice and Meridiana who were flying around to relay messages and guide the gunners, he unhesitatingly ran into the line of fire.

“Boo Boo!!”

“Sister Thief!?”

The deep gunfire sounded like a giant hand slapping the world and this time the storm of lead rushed in from dead ahead.

“…!!!???”

Boo Boo swung his Shining Weapon around wildly and finally

got to work swatting down bullets thicker than a human thumb. His movements were completely ridiculous, but the old soldier rejoiced as he charged toward the Iberian Orc.

“God, this is fun…”

His Shining Weapon longsword was wrapped in an extraordinary amount of electricity.

“This is so much fun, Iberian Orc!! I can fight all I want without worrying about the future or fate of the world!!”

The bright light and loud rumbling pushed Boo Boo back.

He was stuck in a defensive battle and had to continue falling back.

Once the equilibrium was broken, the momentum built up in a negative direction. There was not enough of a break for him to recover. Boo Boo’s group was gradually being pushed out of the inn town and the battle line was shifting from the stone-paved town to the mountains surrounded by dark soil and trees.

Now the inn town was almost instantly swallowed up by the Black Labyrinth created from the countless threads of the spider-crab fusion contraptions. The ominous scene looked more like a sudden lunar eclipse than the waxing and waning of the moon.

An atmosphere of imminent defeat hung in the air.

At this rate, the Fairies’ village would be caught in it all.

No, Boo Boo was protecting something else behind him.

“I think we’ve just about put you in check, Iberian Orc.”

Alpha Zero felt no exhaustion…no, he feared no limits, and he slowly raised his sword and heavy machinegun once more.

Instead of on Boo Boo, his eyes were on the Gate behind him. That was one of the crucial bases that would allow an invasion of earth if the Underworld got its hands on it and began a cyber attack.

“Alpha Zero to Alpha One through Alpha Thirty. Our unit will be taking the reward. Surround them. …Sorry, Bravo through Delta, but you sit this one out and watch.”

The rustling of leaves responded.

These people had to know how to walk through a forest, so they were clearly enjoying the battle and letting their opponent know their location to inspire fear.

Surrounded by that rumble of death, Boo Boo focused on his surroundings with Shining Weapon in hand.

The great tension in the air scorched his nerves. It all came down to the timing. If he misread that by even an instant, he would lose his chance to fight back and he would be devoured.

“I…”

He spoke under his breath while filled with extreme tension

and exhaustion.

The image in his mind was of course that village he had lost. And his younger self standing within the ruins, unable to do anything about it.

It was an image of helplessness, frailty, and loss.

But he used his willpower to cast aside that negative image.

“I can’t overlook tragedy again. Long ago, Beatrice and I promised we would become someone who wouldn’t disappoint each other. So I won’t let you take anything else away!!”

“Men, make sure to say grace. Because it’s dinnertime.”

Dark shades appeared from behind the trees and beyond the underbrush. Elites wielding deadly blades rushed in from every direction like the brutal teeth of a giant maw snapping shut.

It all happened in a slow motion world, as if swimming through sticky molasses.

But before he could cross blades with them, Boo Boo sensed a definite change.

A moment later, a lovely voice pounded on his eardrums.

And it said…

“Metal Jet!!”

A total of eight lines of heat were launched from behind him and passed over his shoulder. At a meter long, those orange-glowing torrents of scorching heat could break through a tank's side armor and fry the interior, but these had been extended to kilometers long using brutally deadly Magic.

A few of the shades dodged, a few attempted to defend and were pierced through, and the surrounding trees were felled and covered in flames.

Yes, flames.

That reminded the last of the Iberian Orcs of only one person.

"Bea…trice…?"

"Don't you remember what we promised each other long ago, Boo Boo?"

Someone set foot in Ground's Nir after passing through the Gate a certain man had desperately defended. Yes, the girl in red armor and a miniskirt once more stood by his side.

And.

She smiled while holding out her Shining Weapon rapier in the same way as him.

"We promised to become someone who wouldn't disappoint each other."

They could turn the tide of battle as many times as it took.

Like this, nothing was impossible for them.

Part 9

It was truly dramatic.

Beatrice's addition to the battle provided more than the simple skill of a Level Capper. Now Boo Boo's group had the use of human Magic just like the Underworld did. That addition of an entire concept helped immensely.

It was like giving a gun to warriors who had only ever used swords and spears.

"Ohh…"

"Forest Fire!!"

"Owaaa

The red-armored Holy Swordswoman was using flame illusion Magic to manage her data by connecting several square frames with red lines.

“(They prioritize defense over evasion for sudden attacks.)”

“!?”

“(They use hand signs before attacking and they tend to match their timing to prevent friendly fire. By securing a half-tempo pause, I can dodge all of their bullets. They seem to push through using the violence of numbers, but the targets can be isolated by splitting them up with flashy Magic. By surrounding them with walls of flames, we can attack individual soldiers as a group. But if they have their numbers, we’re evenly matched and the risk of taking damage ourselves rises.)”

(She’s analyzing the distance we keep and the timing of our attacks!? This isn’t good. With systemized military standards, analyzing an individual could provide information that applies to the whole!!)

Of course, the elite veterans of Elkiad were Magic experts and they could endure the walls of flames using various Elemental Defenses or by flying, but…

“Bravo Zero to all. Emergency report!”

“Charlie Zero here. We too have taken significant damage. We were suddenly attacked from behind!”

“Delta Zero to all. It’s the Gates. Dammit, the humans are

returning from all over!!”

Alpha Zero clicked his tongue at the reports from the other unit leaders.

The Gates could suddenly transport someone in, so expanding the battle line using the existing 2D maps had exposed them to unexpected damage. They could suffer the same tragedy as Charlie Unit: have a Level Capper suddenly appear behind them and hit them with some extraordinary Magic.

Their terrain advantage had been defeated by a method of moving at higher than the third dimension.

And their superior numbers were overcome by the Level Cappers who had extremely high individual skills.

…Simply put, the existing military system was ineffectual here.

“Ha ha.”

But the old soldier actually laughed.

He seemed to be rejoicing at the very fact that this unexpected development was widening the wound.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!! This is what I love about a foreign world: anything can happen!! Now this is what I call a war! This is what I call an apocalypse! You can’t know from second to second who’s going to win and who’s going to lose!!”

“This is not time for celebration. And can’t you even die properly? Melt Cutting!!”

Beatrice's rapier glowed red as she mercilessly cut forward along with Boo Boo, but Alpha Zero took a few steps back to keep his distance.

The old soldier spoke disappointedly in the burning forest.

"This is so much fun. So very much fun… But, well, I guess my fun ends here."

Something approached them from the fiery and smoky forest.

Whatever it was seemed to restrain even battle-crazed Alpha Zero. Just how powerful was this person? Beatrice and Boo Boo held their respective Shining Weapons at the ready to cover each other.

And then he casually walked up.

He had a muscular body.

He wore thick armor.

And he rested an enormous axe on his shoulder.

"…Wha-…?"

Beatrice had heard of his legends. But the age in which she lived was simply too far removed from the age in which he had lived. She had spoken with that Skeleton who wore a cowboy hat, but this was her first time seeing what he looked like in life.

And yet somehow she could tell at a glance.

She knew exactly who this was standing in their way.

Part 10

Palm-sized Fairy Alice was helping her older sister Meridiana with relaying messages and instructing the gunners.

"…Old man…?"

Part 11

That giant body rushed forward while surrounded with a gust of wind as strong as from a passing subway train. Even with the Percentage-type equipment reinforcing her physical strength, this was too much for Beatrice's slender arms to handle. In fact…

(The flowchart I'd created to combat the American military standards doesn't work on him at all!?)

That affected her timing and she was slow to dodge. Boo Boo

immediately stepped forward. His Shining Weapon was like a log or steel beam and it caught the blow from the axe that may have been even larger.

Then something odd happened.

With a great rumbling, Boo Boo sank down as a crater formed in the ground around him.

“Ghhh…!?”

“Boo Boo!!”

When she heard his groan of agony, Beatrice’s rapier gave a roar. The red-hot blade could slice through steel like it was butter and it targeted the large man’s torso from the side, but…

“Alpha Zero, amplification.”

“Sir.”

Even her scream was drowned out.

With a brief response, the old soldier detonated. No, just as announced, his electricity Magic had demonstrated extraordinary power.

A shock ran through Beatrice like a lightning bolt was passing through the center of her body from head to toe and she floated up from the ground. She somehow managed to avoid letting go of her Shining Weapon rapier, but the solid hit had left her limp. If she had not had the thick trunk of a half-

burned tree to lean on, she probably would have fallen onto her butt.

The large axe man showed no mercy.

He whispered in an even deeper voice while pushing Boo Boo back.

“Alpha Eight, barrel. Alpha Nine, shell. Alpha Twelve, sight.”

“Wait…is he commanding them!? Is he messing with the shared settings of their Shining Weapons to manage…no, combine their group Magic!?”

“Data link established. Begin combined action.”

Electricity surrounded a giant pillar of steel as it rushed toward Boo Boo’s belly.

Multiple Elements of Magic had been combined to create this extraordinary fortress-breaking railgun.

That giant body spun into the air, flew in a tailspin, and smashed into the ground without being able to soften the impact. And yet that had not been a direct hit; he had to have diverted it a bit with this Shining Weapon. The deflected shell tore into the slope of a distant mountain and blew it away.

“Hm. According to our calculations, that should have obliterated the entire island, but it seems I was right that an artificial one cannot match the ideal specs. We need to make some adjustments to its sturdiness.”

“None of us can hope to match you, Omega.” Arrogant Alpha Zero sounded more like an obedient butler now. “Back when you were alive really was the world’s golden age. Everything got so much more boring after your untimely death.”

“You’re kidding…right…?”

The girl’s voice was trembling as she ran over to Boo Boo who lay bloody on the ground.

If the Holy Swordswoman’s prediction was correct, this man was the husband who had exchanged vows with Demon Lord Tselika. He would be the young man who had built the inn town, approached human and Nonhuman alike, and fell in love with that demon lord.

It was true that Skeleton had said he was from the time of the Cold War and that he was from the West.

But even so, she simply could not believe it.

“Does that mean…does that mean you were from Elkiad, too!?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, little girl.”

But the old soldier rebuked her.

“It is the height of disrespect to say that hero was the same as us,” said Alpha Zero. “He is a true hero who experienced true war and he is a fierce commander who singlehandedly maintained the value of our peace-dulled allied nation. You could call him a role model for soldiers everywhere. We might

view him as one of us out of respect, but that is only a one-sided addition on our part. That is why we have no numbering for Omega. We only need the one hero and it is unthinkable to place ourselves alongside him."

"A military's overall war potential takes into account their personnel, intelligence, resources, techniques, weapons, etc. We were all unified under the same standards, so there is no point in discussing the abilities of any one individual."

"Your words are too much for the likes of us, sir. But if you would allow me to pathetically defend my position, I have just one thing to say: An optimized standard could never teach others to do what you do."

Beatrice felt dizzy.

This was more than just him belonging to Elkiad. Elkiad had been formed in order to mimic him. Someone might behave differently at work and in their private life, but this was too far removed from the impression she had gotten from Demon Lord Tselika and the Skeleton.

"Gh…"

"Boo Boo!?"

"It doesn't matter who you are… Squeal. If you insist on turning your blade on someone I care for and destroying somewhere I want to protect, then you're my enemy."

"Exactly." The hero calmly nodded while swinging around an axe taller than he was as lightly as if it were a baton. "We only

need focus on the moment, on the battle before our eyes. Our positions and situations are entirely void of meaning when faced with a fight to the death."

Battered Boo Boo desperately worked to stand up and the man known as Omega showed no mercy. He took a large step forward and raised the giant axe as if crushing his opponent with all his might were the polite thing to do.

Boo Boo should have been helpless.

Neither he nor Beatrice should have been able to hold back that fierce attack.

But the Iberian Orc was not split in half starting from the head.

Something intervened before that happened.

"Hello, you two. You hadn't forgotten this old lady-killer, had you?"

The collision of two thick blades produced a deafening clang. One was Omega's great axe, but the other was an equally-large axe. However, it was made of a different substance. It was a horrifically sinister axe made from a complex combination of many human bones.

The large muscular man held the former and a Skeleton in a cowboy hat held the latter.

Their appearances clashed horribly, but they locked blades like they were mirror images.

“In an instant-death fantasy world, the addition or removal of a single enemy or ally – even if they’re a lowly grunt or green rookie – can cause one side or the other to entirely collapse. So I’m not going to hold back as I strengthen this side.”

No. No!?

“They’re…the same? But wait. Then which one has his soul!?”

“Think about it rationally, young lady. If the Underworld could suck up and use every last dead soul that appeared in Ground’s Nir, there are some things that wouldn’t make any sense. What about Vampire Kallikantzaros? If every dead soul went to the Underworld without exception, she wouldn’t gain anything from sucking blood.”

“Now that you mention it. But if that’s true…”

“The Underworld can absorb dead souls, but not if they’re modified by a special contract or curse. And there’s another piece of evidence supporting that theory. A pretty major one at that,” responded the cowboy hat Skeleton. “I’m talking about the Iberian Orcs. If everyone from that destroyed village attacked at once, we would’ve reached checkmate long before now.”

“Ah.”

“But that hasn’t happened. Why not? It’s simple: Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon. The souls were digitized and sealed in there, so the Underworld couldn’t absorb them. …Although that means it’s possible the Underworld made this direct attack in

order to retrieve their property.”

In that case, was the Skeleton the proper partner of Demon Lord Tselika?

He had a large red jewel on his cowboy hat. It was a Philosopher’s Stone and it was that stone’s power that gave the Skeleton his sense of self. If it contained his soul just like Boo Boo’s Shining Weapon…

“You imposter. You sure talk a lot for not having a tongue.”

“Ha ha. That’s what I thought. If I was in your position, I probably couldn’t stay silent either. Did you throw out your pride and obey the Underworld so you could reach the island and find me?”

“…?”

Beatrice frowned at Omega and the Skeleton’s words.

And then she received the direct answer.

“You’re no more than a copy using that Philosopher’s Stone’s processing power to simulate my personality. It sickens me to think something sewn together from corpses claims to be Tselika’s husband.”

“Yeah, it probably does. I am Skull Wave, a talking grave pieced together from a lost ideal so the living could spend more time with the dead. But if the real one’s soul has rotted enough to become such a piece of shit, then I really don’t think I can let my wife see the real thing. Don’t you agree, Mr.

Omega?”

Part 12

Beatrice was not the only one to reenter Ground’s Nir.

“Onee-sama, over here!”

“Y-yes!”

Noble Dancer Rusalka wore a black leotard with armor added in places and Summon Hunter Gruagach wore dark blue mourning clothes with a veil over her face. The blonde girls exited from separate Gates, fought and beat back the giant spider-crab fusion monsters, avoided the Black Labyrinth as much as possible, and successfully regrouped here.

They were relatively free to act when compared to Filinion and Armelina who had gone to the Detached Magic Palace first. When the police officer had sent out the emergency signal, they had been forced to enter Ground’s Nir from Tokyo and Kobe.

It was midday on earth, but the other world had slight differences in planetary rotation and gravity. Those small differences added up, so it was nearly sunset. Vampire Kallikantzaros would be leaving her coffin soon.

They were on a small hill overlooking the inn town, but the town was in a horrific state. Black smoke and clouds of dust were rising into the air and the entire area was covered in passageways that looked like mysterious black tunnels. Even if they kept the original street layout in mind, they would only get lost and driven into countless blind spots and dead ends. The place was even more sinister than the war-torn areas seen on the news.

“I hope everyone else wasn’t trapped in Tokyo and managed to Sign In. Including Wildefrau and Huldra…”

“Mh. What is with that scrawny mole guy? I will protect you, Onee-sama!”

“Don’t be like that, Rusalka. She’s Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra when she’s here.”

The government had to know where the Gates were and humans could only remain active here for a few days. If they did not settle the Underworld issue in that time, they would be arrested once they Signed Out.

The conditions were even stricter than the usual Labyrinth exploration.

There was no time to spare, so what was it they needed to do?

“We can’t board the Underworld unless we push back the dead troops that have invaded the island. And we can’t solve the fundamental problem without doing something about the

Underworld itself.”

“Right.”

“The crucial key to this has to be the Break News due to their extraordinary power. Since dead souls belong to the Underworld, we can’t let even one of them die. This might sound overly dry, but the resolution will be delayed for each ‘piece’ on the board that is taken. And since we have a time limit for staying here, that would be devastating for us.”

“In other words, we have to find out where all the Break News are on the island and support them where necessary to turn things around. Right, Onee-sama!?”

At times like this, it helped to have the Student Council President who had led the Religious Society. She might look docile, but she was quite skilled at analyzing the situation and supplying a simple objective.

Merely being correct was not enough.

Explaining it simply and increasing the other person’s understanding would increase their motivation.

And a few Break News could be seen fighting from where they were. Giant butterfly wings were breaking apart and scattering a toxic red mist in the inn town and two enormous dragons were grappling and firing water and flame dragon breaths at each other in the sky above. Those paradoxes with a soul were generally uncontrollable and did not grow attached to humans, but they would take defensive action if

an external threat was overrunning their territory.

“Wh-where should we start?”

Rusalka looked overwhelmed and tapped her index fingers together in front of her small chest, so she was probably in a similar mental state to someone given too many options too choose from at a store.

Gruagach narrowed down their plans to something simple.

“We start with the Thousand Dragon. We have no way of approaching Sutriona inside that toxic mist and, if we can help the Thousand Dragon recover, she should help us support the others with aerial bombings that don’t require getting close.”

“Roger! You really are the best, Onee-sama!!”

Of course, a human couldn’t exactly fly up to reach a giant Dragon soaring through the heavens, but there was one thing to keep in mind: The Thousand Dragon had a will of her own and could be communicated with. If they could not fly into the sky, they just had to get her to approach the ground.

Rusalka held a scythe with a circular blade that made it resemble the number 9. Gruagach held a large bow with close-range blades and a stabilizer. They were cutting it close with sunset so soon, but they managed to reflect the sunlight. When the flying black Dragon noticed, she rapidly descended.

Instead of grabbing them with her wings or claws, she used the power of the air to launch them up.

It was a lot like riding an aircushion. The two girls felt like dustballs in the wind as the Thousand Dragon subtly adjusted her position to catch them on her gargantuan back.

Rusalka was in a bad mood as soon as she landed in a sitting position.

“You stupid dragon!! How dare you blow Onee-sama’s skirt up like that! Oh, poor Onee-sama! It was like an umbrella during a typhoon!! But, Onee-sama, was that leather I saw below there…?”

“R-Rusalka, please don’t rub salt in the wound…”

Gruagach blushed behind the veil and hung her head, but this was no time to get dragged down by her past failure.

“Wow, look at that, Onee-sama.”

“…Incredible. It’s almost like rotting fruit.”

When looking down from above, they had an excellent view of the Black Labyrinth being laid out by the spider-crab fusions. It already covered a third of the island and was quickly approaching a half. Plus, it seemed the Underworld Lord was aiming to invade the earth. From that viewpoint, it was frightening how the black threads were gradually approaching the Great Plate Plain where so many of the Gates were concentrated.

Also, the Thousand Dragon was still fighting. She was being pursued by a silver form that matched her 1000 meters. After the recklessly rapid descent, she flapped her wings to break

through the clouds. Rusalka was a Wind expert, but without the help of her Magic, they would have been exposed to such great pressure in the blink of an eye that the oxygen in their blood would have collapsed much like altitude sickness.

Everyone was in danger, but they could not move freely until they eliminated the more direct threat. Gruagach elegantly held the hat and skirt of her mourning clothes while thinking about their pursuer.

“Is that a Dragon…? No, is it a contraption built to look like one!?”

“Mh. There are a bunch of little Fairies clinging to it.”

“You can see them?”

“Don’t underestimate the kinetic vision of a dancer who spins around all the time!”

Rusalka gave a small snort of pride, so she could probably be trusted in this.

In that case…

“I see. Fairies excel at Craft skills, so their ghosts must have worked together to build an Architecture Dragon from the ground up.”

“Let’s tear it apart and get the Thousand Dragon helping elsewhere. Her aerial bombing would probably be really useful…whoa!?”

Their footing suddenly shook violently. Rusalka and Gruagach could not understand it since it was outside the audible range of human hearing, but it looked like the 1000m Dragon was throwing a fit. Just like a baby shaking its head in protest.

“Wah…oh!? What the hell is she doing!?”

“Hmm, she might know those Fairies.”

In that case, it would be cruel to just start attacking them. They realized that the Thousand Dragon was only holding the other Dragon in check and running away. She did not seem to be starting a serious fight to the death.

However.

“Hey, Thousand Dragon?”

She had no idea if her voice could reach, but Gruagach put on her best smile to help calm down the Dragon.

“Since they’re the pawns of the Underworld, killing them simply means returning them there. So you can beat them to a pulp and put off making a real decision without having to worry about anything.”

“Eeeeek!? It’s Onee-sama’s occasional S
siiii

“Rusalka.”

“S-sure. …Even after meeting people like Wildefrau and Armelina, there’s no one as scary as you when you get serious…”

The Noble Dancer, whose long blonde ponytail formed a ringlet curl, pouted her lips while obediently fulfilling her role. She raised the 9-shaped round-blade scythe, activated the Shining Weapon, and selected some Magic.

Right now, she did not need a homing bullet or a vacuum blade that could fell a large tree.

No matter how gigantic their opponent was, it was clearly gaining lift by slicing through the air. Rusalka could directly control the air with her Wind magic, so she was the worst possible opponent for it.

“You might as well drop it on the inn town to support Sutriona.”

“Umm, air pressure manipulation? Okay, Downburst!!”

It was like a fighter jet stalling.

With a blast of wind, the silver Architecture Dragon lost the power keeping it airborne and began to tilt. From there, it was straight down. The giant contraption fell in a tailspin with its head pointed down. No matter how much it flapped its wings, it could not obtain any lift.

It was just like a meteor.

The kilometer-long structure crashed into the center of the nearly-deserted inn town and the surrounding buildings and Black Labyrinth tunnels were blown away like a giant splash.

“Ah, ahhh… Is Sutriona really all right after that?”

“She is a Break News, so there is nothing to worry about.”

That conclusion did not seem to have much scientific evidence behind it. As they watched, a large lump(?) of several tunnels was pushed outward and crushed before being caught in a great explosion that pierced the heavens. The ghosts used firearms in addition to Magic, so some ammunition storage in the trenches may have ignited. …Also, it was still a question whether or not the Fairy Queen really was all right. Rusalka felt like a criminal.

Meanwhile, the color of the sky was changing. Orange became purple and purple became pitch black. Night had finally fallen. Vampire Kallikantzaros would be reemerging from the ghost ship.

“Thousand Dragon, could you please blow away those…are those plain uniforms Soviet? Regardless, can you blow away those soldiers surrounding Ileana?”

“Ah, awah.”

“After that, support the volunteer army of Cat Sith and Cu Sith, take care of the Elkiad group approaching the southern forest…oh, and I just spotted Wildefrau and Huldra, so bomb

the spiders around them. Yes, wipe clean the entire Black Labyrinth on the coast. Hee hee hee. Wipe it clean and throw it out!! The words come to my lips so naturally. Isn't it romantic?"

"Awawawawawawa, awawawawawawawawawawawah!?"

Rusalka paled and cried out when she saw Gruagach holding her hands to her cheeks with a spellbound look on her face. It was also worth noting that she had casually identified soldiers from the former Soviet Union after no more than a glance at their uniforms. What kind of girl was this Student Council President?

"If you find a similar lump of gathered tunnels, concentrate on that! That seems to be where they keep their ammunition, so it's a chance for a chain reaction, assuming we have no allies nearby!!"

"Ahhh!! So I really shouldn't have done that in the inn town while Sutriona was there!?"

The ultra-high pressure water blasts tore across the surface like machinegun fire. The tiny targets along that line were swallowed up and blown away. A shot anywhere near a lump of tunnels would trigger a tremendous explosion that swept everything away. It was like an aerial bombing by a gunship in a movie or video game. Instead of an attack helicopter, those were large transport aircraft modified to carry weapons. It was all so flashy that each individual act of destruction felt unreal.

The Black Labyrinth was engulfing the island like a lunar eclipse, but it was torn away with each big explosion. That was proof that a change had occurred in the one-sided struggle for territory. The seesaw was tilting back in the other direction.

“Hm? Is that…?”

While guiding her great dragon, the queen of the heavens spotted something on the surface.

Night had fallen, but there were fires burning everywhere and orange sparks were intermittently flying in one location. That came from the clash of weapons. Giant axes made of steel and bone were colliding and occasional producing something like a will-o’-the-wisp.

For some reason, Gruagach felt something stir inside her when she saw the illuminated figures.

No, that may not have been her own sensation. It may have been a remnant of the demon lord’s soul which had permeated her body for so long but no longer lived within Ground’s Nir.

“Oh, Boo Boo and Beatrice are there too! Onee-sama, are we going to ‘support’ them too!?”

Rusalka did not directly call it a bombing or cannon blast, but please understand that this was due to the complicated feelings of an adolescent girl.

“…”

But as the mourning dress girl stared intently down at the surface…

“No, the Thousand Dragon’s cannon would be difficult to aim in such a close-range battle.”

“Hm? But the other side’s already a Skeleton, so can’t we just blow them both away?”

The Noble Dancer was being quickly infected by the madness, but now Gruagach was beginning to cool down.

She calmly reached for her longbow.

“Onee-sama…?”

“This may be a cruel decision, but I cannot help but feel any resolution to this that does not involve her is incomplete.”

“Wait, Onee-sama!? Um, uh, I thought you no longer had any power as a Summon Hunter…?”

As Rusalka so reservedly pointed out, most of Gruagach’s power had come from the Charm ability given to her while possessed by Demon Lord Tselika. With Tselika gone, she no longer had a summoning contract with anyone. It was a lot like having a gun but no ammo.

But that did not matter.

Gruagach knew of just one person who would appear in response to her contract.

“Poor, foolish demon lord estranged from your beloved. I call you back now. If you wish to take advantage of your first and last chance, then answer my call.”

A man born on earth had died in Ground’s Nir and a demon lord born in Ground’s Nir had traveled to earth. That meant the two could never be together again. But that was technically not accurate. The demon lord had not actually crossed between the two worlds. Just like manipulating a metal nail by pressing a magnet against the other side of a thin wall, she was merely producing an illusion of her presence there by sending her “influence” to earth. She existed at the boundary between worlds, but she still remained on the Ground’s Nir side of that wall.

So this was possible.

By providing an attraction even stronger than the one pulling the demon lord toward earth, it was possible to peel her away from the wall and guide her back to the center of Ground’s Nir!!

“Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier!! I make this suggestion while under the influence of no one! I act on my own will and responsibility! Bind another contract with me and use all your devilishness and charm to assist me!!!!”

It was a white thunderbolt.

Powerful energy entered Gruagach through the top of her head, wreaked havoc inside her body, passed to every last part of her, and gave a human the power of a demon lord.

The dreadful shock blew away the Magic mourning clothes that had gracefully hidden all of her body's skin. This exposed some sinister armor decorated with leather belts and steel armor that provided it with a scorpion motif. Her long, long chestnut hair also spread out behind her.

"…Why…?"

Something translucent approached her.

It was a bewitching demon lord with large horns, wings, and a tail.

"Why would you grant my wish?"

There was a quiet metallic scraping.

It came from Gruagach's hand as she held her bow. She held something along with the weapon: a handmade keychain. The accessory had a thin chain attached to a decoration the size of a ping pong ball.

It was one of the Circles that had been briefly popular.

Everyone had gotten rid of theirs after discovering how frightening Demon Lord Tselika was, but Gruagach must have searched one out after that.

"I have yet to experience a true love that burns my heart away. But by your hand, I have experienced the horrific pain and humiliation that comes after that."

She did not hesitate.

“However, I believe I understand that it is not something to be trampled underfoot. Demon Lord Tselika, even if it is the love of a wicked woman like you.”

Her armor-shaped additional Shining Weapon had once acted as a controller that bound the poor puppet of a girl with the signals of intense pain and pleasure, but that was no longer the case.

She chose to stab the scorpion tail into her back to activate it and she raised the stabilizer-equipped longbow that included close-range blades.

She nocked an arrow, drew the bowstring with all her might, and sealed the power of the contract inside.

She sealed the demon lord herself inside.

A battle raged inside the burning forest. On one side was a muscular ghost and on the other was a collection of many bones.

Which one was real and which one was false?

Which would survive? On which one would the goddess of victory smile?

“Now, Tselika, go and take your resolution!!”

Part 13

A stabbing sound led to a far too brief conclusion.

“Gah…”

A glowing white arrow fell from the heavens and pierced through someone’s heart without hesitation. Of course, an arrow falling straight down could not pierce through a human’s heart from behind. The arrow clearly contained a will of its own. Its course bent sharply in midair and it chose one of the two as its target.

“…Huh?”

Drops of red blood dripped to the ground.

Yes. A heart and blood.

At that point, it was obvious which one Tselika had chosen to hit with a fatal blow. After all, a Skeleton had no heart or blood.

Meaning…

Meaning…

“I will not ask which one is real.” The whispered woman’s voice sounded like she had her face nestled in her beloved’s chest. “My wonderful husband was hated by all but never shed a tear and met his end with a smile. And that is why he left such a deep impression on my heart and the hearts of the

subordinates who learned of his death.”

Had Gruagach provided the cruelest revenge or a touch of salvation?

Either way, Tselika had made her decision in the moonlight.

“It is not like you to cling to this ugly world.”

Even if he was the real one, she had decided it was right to pierce through his chest.

“If you have changed this much in the intervening time, then I will provide the finishing blow with your unchanged form in my heart. …It is over, darling. The eternal wall of time found after death is too much for a human like you to bear.”

The man remained silent for a while.

The hero had not succumbed even after being pierced through at such a vital point, but he finally smiled a little.

“…I see.”

He seemed to have accepted something.

He seemed to have accepted his own death.

“I was never afraid of anything: trench warfare, poison gas weapons, tanks, fighters, or even the nuclear missiles of the Americans and the Soviets. No, even when I was caught in a plot and killed in this foreign world, I felt no shaking in the core of my body.”

And he spoke with satisfaction in his voice despite how sudden the conclusion had arrived.

“But no matter what…I’m just no match for this wife of mine…”

Beatrice also watched it play out.

She watched this decision and conclusion that could never occur between Boo Boo and the Holy Swordswoman, that she would never want to come between them, and that could only have happened between Tselika and that man.

That man and woman completed a world together.

“Oh, oh…”

But there was apparently someone who refused to accept it.

The old soldier known as Alpha Zero had been left behind once more.

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!? Owwwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhh hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

to the Underworld before he's resurrected!!"

Between the Lines 1

"Abyss has learned new Magic. Metal Jet: standby."

There was a girl named Abyss.

She was the ultimate weapon automatically developed in the deepest level of Ground's Nir, an armory so large it could be mistaken for an island. The structures of all plants and animals were recreated, released in the experimental region known as the Labyrinth, and intentionally sent to clash with the intruders who entered that place. That was used to research the strongest body, strongest mind, and strongest combat ability and combine them all into the strongest being.

But that had changed.

Abyss made calculation after calculation with the force of a Gatling gun as she continued an intense counter cyber attack against the very armory that had created her and was now trying to abandon the island's shape and make it a part of the girl.

She could not hand over her privileges and she could not answer the armory's request.

She focused on the bandages wrapped around where her arm had been severed. That would not help repair her in the slightest and it in fact could cause a fire, but the feelings contained in the act were a different matter. The girl-shaped weapon named Abyss was a master of logic and efficiency, but she would never take feelings lightly.

The girl was a processor core that was standalone but flexible and her external accessories could split up processing work in parallel. Their cyber war pushed back and forth, but then the armory weakened its attack.

"The situation has changed. The Black Labyrinth's effective controlled territory has shrunk from 48% to 19%. Correcting the hopeless simulation to match."

"If the invasion has lulled, Abyss rejects the suggested attack."

"This is only a lull and not a fundamental solution. Continuing request."

"Abyss rejects the suggestion. Their power must be reassessed."

"That assumes the conditions will remain the same as the current simulation."

Something was displayed.

It was a spec sheet for Abyss's predicted enemy, the

Underworld. One point was flashing.

“The soldiers have been defeated, so the Underworld Lord will make an appearance before long.”

“…”

“Once that Lord appears on the board, the current situation will likely be reversed in the blink of an eye. The odds are slim that they can overcome even the first heat-beam antiaircraft blast.”

Chapter 2: Wandering Labyrinth * Imprisoning Inferno

Part 1

A mental support was apparently quite important.

Once they lost the hero known as Omega, the old soldiers of Elkiad lost their former luster. And while Omega came from before the standardization, those old soldiers had trained their bodies to maximum efficiency following the military standards, so a single flowchart could be used to predict all of their actions. There was nothing to fear when you knew exactly when to dodge and attack. There was at least no need to worry about being surrounded and targeted from a blind spot.

“Sorry we’re late!!”

“You’ve been fighting continuously without any way to recover, haven’t you? But that changes now!”

Fighter Priest Armelina and White Witch Filinion joined the fray. They seemed to have safely escaped the Detached Magic Palace in Roppongi, Tokyo, but since they used different Gates, they could not have been together from the beginning. The wrecking ball woman who worked as a police officer was one thing, but how had the defenseless cow made her way across Ground's Nir while it was overrun with the dead?

The glasses girl gave the answer with a smug look on her face and her overly large chest puffed proudly out.

"I tried some things on the way here, but it turns out the old recovery potions on the Undead trick works."

"Eh?"

"When you sprinkle it on something without any life force, it seems to cause a conflict or malfunction in whatever it is the Underworld is using to keep the dead souls in this world while still dead. It acts like a lethal poison for them. Take this!!"

She tossed more and more colorful test tubes and the effect was truly dramatic.

In a single blow, the frightening elites disintegrated even more blatantly than a salted slug.

"Jheeee

“Don’t underestimate the pure and just Shrine Maiden Princess. Vee. I don’t know anything about this Alpha Rice guy or whatever he’s called, but it’s insane to continue attacking these sturdy Undead from head-on without using any kind of trick.”

Beatrice was actually kind of glad that Tselika had managed to finish off Omega herself before this happened. It would not have made anyone happy for the cow to take care of him so casually.

“This is only a temporary death, not an eternal farewell. Omega, oh, Omega… I am returning to you now, sir…!!”

Beatrice clicked her tongue and thrust her rapier through the center of his chest.

It did not even feel like stabbing a human. The sensation was halfway between a thick mist and yogurt.

This time, his outline completely dissolved into the night air. They seemed to be closer to Ghosts than Zombies. They were apparently supported by something occult instead of just being clones.

“Squeal…”

“It doesn’t matter if we win or lose each individual battle. Boo Boo, let’s hurry on. If we don’t do something about the Underworld itself, they’ll be resurrected again.”

“Yeah, we don’t have time for anything else. Based on what Inoue said, the Thousand Dragon, Gruagach, and Rusalka are

holding them back from the sky. Let's use the cow's recovery potions and the air support to head for the beach."

While they discussed their plans, a few small forms poked their heads out from behind cover.

"Armely…"

"We've decided to fight. We've formed a *volunteer army* together!"

"What should we do, Armely? Tell us! Hurry up and tell us!!"

It was the bipedal dogs and cats known as Cu Sith and Cat Sith. They wore butler outfits and maid outfits respectively and they held small axes and spears made from a special material called Diamond Salt.

Beatrice looked confused.

"The residents of the southern forest? Armelina, I know you like cute things, but when did you become friends with them?"

"C-cough, cough! There are perfectly good and mature reasons for this…!!"

"Armely, I want to eat octopus balls again…!"

"Although since it was wrapped in those round balls, I'm still not sure what octopus is."

"I want to see you spin them on the grill! I want to eat those

round things again!!”

Filinion erased all expression from her face and pointed at the suspect.

“Officer, this is the one who was luring in pure hearts using treats.”

“I’m the police officer!! And those cute little things were begging me to show them what earth food is like and they were just so delighted that I couldn’t’ help but keep doing it. Surely you know what that’s like!!”

“Why do weirdos always insist that they’re perfectly normal? Right, Beatrice?”

“(Uuh… I can’t say anything this time when I did pretty much the same thing with little Boo Boo and the grilled fish and meatballs.)”

“Oh, honestly. Is everyone from earth like this?”

At any rate. The Underworld battle would come with a fairly serious risk of death even for the Level Cappers and Break News. They appreciated the thought, but this was not a journey for those bipedal dogs and cats who were not suited for direct combat. In fact, even without an enemy, there was a very real risk of them tripping and harming themselves on their own blades.

Armelina crouched down to get on their eye level.

“H-hey. I think there’s an important job for you other than

opposing the Underworld."

"…Ehh? But I want to go with you, Armely."

"If you're all going somewhere, how about going to the southern forest? We'll be dealing with this whole Underworld business, so I want you to protect that forest while we do that. Listen, this is an important job and you're the only ones I can rely on."

"Well, if you say so, Armely. We'll do everything we can!"

Was that a technique she had learned from giving traffic safety lectures? Filinion's eyes glowed with an even sharper light when she saw how solidly Armelina was controlling them.

And with that, they finally began the counterattack.

To help any humans that arrived later, they wrote on the dirt and trees that the dead army was weak to Recovery Magic.

"Now! Let's get going! Go, go!!"

"You stupid cow! Why are you thoughtlessly heading right toward the Black Labyrinth!?"

The Holy Swordswoman widened her eyes at that immediate suicidal action and grabbed the back of Filinion's collar to stop her.

What mattered here was to *never enter* the Black Labyrinth created by the giant spider-crab fusion monsters. It did not

matter in the slightest that a new field could be exciting.

Armelina also sounded exasperated.

“Since that dumb cow managed survive long enough to regroup with me, those Recovery Magic attacks must really work well.”

During an old war, it had taken months to get past a complex arrangement of trenches. New weapons such as tanks and poison gas had been developed to help get past them. That might seem like the problem of an older age, but none of that built-up technology existed in this foreign world.

The Fighter Priest gulped and looked at one of the contraptions that had stalled nearby.

“These flipped-over spiders are pretty weird. They don’t look to strong in a direct fistfight, but the direct alterations they make to the terrain are a big deal. They take away any advantage the terrain might give us…”

“Ara…chne? Is that their name carved into them? Arachne. I wonder who named them.”

The only things they had to rely on were the Fairies’ catapults and the Thousand Dragon.

The boulders from above, the gunpowder barrels, and the ultra-high water pressure breaths were tearing the Black Labyrinth to pieces, crushing it, and rendering it useless. When the dead soldiers lying in wait scattered, they were hit by Filinion’s insta-kill recovery potion attack before they could

regroup.

When the aerial bombing crushed a distant large lumps formed from intersecting tunnels, it created enough of an explosion to form a crater.

“Waaah!?”

“What was that!? An Elkiad ammo dump or something!?”

It was bad for their hearts. Even at that distance, the shockwave nearly knocked them over as it swept across the surface. But it was also doing effective damage to the Underworld’s army. And it happened before they even had to cross blades or exchange Magic attacks with the dead.

They would not stand on their opponent’s field. They would not stupidly go along with what their opponent wanted.

“Hm, hmm, hm, hm, hm, hmmm.”

“Ehh? Why does this just feel like a fun adventure when Filinion’s with us? We were fighting on the verge of death just a bit ago.”

“The healer really is the cornerstone of a Party’s survival. You need a clever and reliable White Witch like me. Vee, vee.”

“I’m pretty sure this has gone too far for that to explain it.”

However, Beatrice and Armelina had not been fighting such desperate battles because they wanted to. Nothing was better than an easy solution.

They arrived at the dark beach.

Boo Boo brought a hand to his mouth and spoke with deep emotion in his voice.

“We really managed to push back that solid army and reach their base…”

“We don’t know how many forces the Underworld is holding in reserve, so we can’t let our guard down. We’ve temporarily pushed the hands back on the doomsday clock, but the gears are still turning.”

Meanwhile, Armelina seemed worried about something else. She was focused on the small-scale tactics instead of large-scale strategy.

“The catapult support has stopped…”

“Squeal. Those big spoons are in the forest, so they can’t be moved easily.”

“There are still people fighting further inland, so we can let the Fairies help them out.”

They saw Meridiana, Alice, Morgan, and other small Fairies flitting through the night sky and reflecting the moonlight with their thin wings to send them a signal before flying back inland. They did not seem panicked, so this was not as serious as the catapults being taken out.

Beatrice, Boo Boo, and the others focused on their own position. With no room for artificial lights, the ocean should

have been absorbing the starlight and sparkling like a carpet of jewels, but that had changed.

An ominous and silhouette rose like a mountain and blotted it all out.

Ground's Nir took three days to walk around, but this rotting marine creature was even larger. Something resembling a shark or killer whale was sticking up onto the beach. The smell reaching their nose may have been its rotting flesh. Or was it the sulfur from orange-glowing lava flowing from its wounds?

"This is…the Underworld?" said Beatrice.

"Squeal. I've never seen or eaten an animal like this."

The marine creature did not move at all. It was impossible to tell whether it was alive or dead. Its opened mouth extended wide to the left and right and contained cluttered rows of cold, crystal-like fangs or teeth that were larger than the average house. Its eyes looked like an ominous red full moon, but more than just two, it had several large eyes like a spider.

Was it even possible for a structure that enormous to stick up onto the beach? Or had it first used the power of air to float above the ocean's surface?

"Is anyone else here? I don't see Huldra or Wildefrau anywhere on the beach."

"With an entry route this huge, we're bound to get split up. And if we left behind some kind of sign in the middle of enemy territory, it would only lead the Underworld's troops

right to us. Soldiers are probably really good at that." Armelina then tilted her head. "Now, this seems to be the new area, but how do we get in?"

"Hmm. There is a big mouth open right in front of us."

"Eh? Wait a second, Beatrice! Are you really going to charge right in there!?"

They only had a few days to move around freely. And the Underworld was even larger than Ground's Nir which would take three days to walk around. They had no time to spare, but they could not afford to rush things and get eaten.

Meanwhile, the Thousand Dragon passed by overhead.

"Aerial surveillance is important, but is there no way for them to map out the inside like that?"

And just as Armelina said that …

A crimson beam of heat was launched from the Underworld's back and into the tranquil night sky.

It was a lot like an anti-air laser. The black flying Dragon was apparently taken completely by surprise. Her frantic evasive action was too little too late, her large wings were damaged, and she fell into the ocean.

"Wait, what!? Are you kidding!?"

"Weren't Gruagach and Rusalka riding on that Dragon…?"

“The Thousand Dragon can swim like a swan and she’s large enough to act like a small island, so I doubt those girls would just drown…but I am worried about them.”

Meanwhile, the Holy Swordswoman looked up at the Underworld that towered above them like a cliff.

“Why did it attack the Thousand Dragon up there instead of us right in front of it?”

“It’s scary to think about, but could it be about angle of fire? Y’know, like an, um, antiaircraft gun that can only aim into the sky.”

“Or maybe…”

It was far too simple a conclusion. Beatrice used red lines to connect rectangular frames with her fire illusion Magic and she placed an “important” marker on the top of the Underworld.

“There might be something on top it doesn’t want us to see.”

Either way, this proved that their opponent had enough power to immobilize the Thousand Dragon, a paradox with a soul, in a single shot. And that power could be used as an extreme-long-range projectile. If that was forcibly fired on the island of Ground’s Nir, they would lose all the momentum they had built up. And if the Break News were taken out, they could be driven away before they had a chance to recover.

“Boo Boo, let’s search out this secret of theirs. Before the second heat beam antiaircraft blast.”

Part 2

And there were some who remained on the beach.

For example, the silver-haired Fairy Queen named Sutriona and the blonde-haired Vampire named Kallikantzaros. They were both from the Break News that held extraordinary power on the island of Ground's Nir. She was not directly working with them, but Ileana (or at least one of her copies) would be around there too.

Since they were able to watch the others leave like this, they had obviously escaped the previous desperate situation.

They could not grow careless since a single mistake could bring them right back to such a situation, but they had reached a temporary lull. It helped a lot that the catapults and the Thousand Dragon had focused on the enemy ammo dumps. The Black Labyrinth had been torn apart from the sky and the struggle over territory had been pushed back.

With red glowing bats fluttering around her and her large chest pushing out her crimson negligee, the Vampire softly stroked the head of the small pig stuffed animals she held.

"I honestly thought you would go with them."

“Don’t be stupid. I have to protect the Fairy village. And I hear the Break News are linked to the underground Labyrinth as a secondary power source. The material and internal structure of the Underworld are a mystery, but if we went in there, it could possibly break that link and place some kind of strain on the island.”

The black ribbon dress girl placed her hands on her slender hips and Kallikantzaros winked at her while crossing her arms such that they lifted up her breasts which were too large for her height.

“Since you aren’t throwing all that aside and heading out for some fun, should I assume you’ve actually matured some?”

“Are you picking a fight with me?”

Sutriona’s voice grew ominously deep, but she was aware this was an emergency.

“Besides, the humans are counting on us.”

“True enough.”

As previously stated, Beatrice and the others could only spend so much time here and the Underworld was vast. The odds were decent that they would reach the several-day time limit before solving the problem concerning the Underworld.

So the Holy Swordswoman had made a request on the way here.

“If they can’t solve everything in there, they want us to try

blowing away the Underworld in a combined attack."

"Well, if that would give us a nice happy ending, no one would be going in there in the first place, but it's probably easier for them to know they have some kind of insurance."

Then a small light fluttered down to that extraordinary pair.

It was Morgan, elder of the palm-sized Fairies.

"I wish to respectfully ask you paradoxes for support. We have found some remnants of the dead in the southern forest. They have yet to make contact, but the Cat Sith and Cu Sith remaining there will be unable to handle them. I am aware how presumptuous it is to ask this, but…"

"Not to worry. That Vampire won't accept any obvious requests, but she secretly likes helping people out. And that's where she lives, so I'm sure she'll be flying back there before long."

"…"

"See? Just look how tsundere she is. You mustn't let that murderous aura fool you, Morgan. She might be scowling, but she's blushing on the inside."

"No, um, I did say it was presumptuous of me to ask, so wouldn't that be how she really feels…?"

As they discussed the matter, the Break News and the messenger Fairy left the open beach and returned to the inland forest. The primary battlefield had moved within the

Underworld, but not all of their forces were concentrated there. Some of the dead were wandering the island and more fools would likely appear in the Underworld and head out onto the island.

The number killed would not determine the victor here.

If they saw the number protected as the deciding factor, then it was hard to say they had passed the hardest point.

…And while their pride kept them from directly saying so, they were gradually being worn down. If the open beach would get them sniped, then it was best to move inland where they could hide behind cover.

The Break News were the ultimate fighting force, so they could not allow themselves to be defeated so easily.

The Thousand Dragon did not understand that and that was why she was known as the weakest of them.

“For now, I’ll be helping the Fairies evacuate their village. You head to the southern forest as requested.”

“Understood. …I hear those cats and dogs have started putting together a volunteer army. It might be best if I threatened them a bit to make sure they do not shorten their lifespans needlessly.”

As they started toward their respective jurisdictions, Sutriona whispered quietly.

“We’re covering your asses. So go at it all you want.”

Part 3

Entering through the mouth would have been too frightening, so Boo Boo's group avoided an internal course and instead climbed up the surface of the giant marine creature known as the Underworld. The scene changed entirely when they arrived on top of its back.

"Squeal…"

They saw a dark land covered in dips and bumps. The parts that had rotted into a liquid were like toxic bogs and red magma spewed from areas that were unnatural torn up. The exposed bone seen elsewhere had the cold shine of pale crystal and the scene as a whole was surprisingly colorful. It was like a park during the Christmas season.

"Pant, pant. Th-the heat is pretty intense once you get up here."

"I don't care, so just hurry on up. Why am I stuck pushing up on your huge ass in the afterlife of a foreign world!?"

Despite all her smugness from before, White Witch Filinion was already gasping for breath. The flaaat instructor was having trouble in her attempts to make sure that amateur climber did not fall.

Beatrice also had to wipe sweat from her brow.

“That’s the Underworld for you. I guess it wouldn’t be a comfortable place for the living.”

“Boo. But, Beatrice, I think I feel a hot wind and a cold wind.”

“Is there a chill coming from somewhere?”

“W-wouldn’t it be from those crystal-like bones? Pant.”

Once they had all safely reached the top, they began exploring.

“No, wait!!”

Armelina pushed the glasses girl’s large butt and the pure White Witch rolled along the black rotting flesh. And she had of course had a reason for that.

“(Boo Boo, you duck down too! Hide in that dip over there!!)”

Even if they were on top of a living creature, it still felt like a small island and the other end was hidden beyond the horizon. With all the rotting, the surface rose and fell a lot and it felt a lot like crossing countless hills. The red glow of the lava and blue glow of the crystal cast deep shadows, so it was impossible to fully grasp the scene at a glance.

Amid all that, Boo Boo’s group hid in one of the torn up pieces of the surface while loud shaking footsteps passed right by them along the black plain.

But the shaking did not come from the size of what this was. It came from the number.

“Wh-what is that?” asked Armelina in bewilderment. “Are they marching…?”

Sure enough, a lot of people were gathered in ordered groups and marching in unison like something from a military parade. Even their pace and the swinging of their arms were perfectly synchronized. Needless to say, these were the human souls trapped by the Underworld.

“Urp. Peh, peh. Eek. It’s always something, isn’t it? And it looks like there are about four hundred of them in this group.”

They could come up with a general number so quickly thanks to the orderly ranks. The dead souls formed a perfect 20x20 square as they freely moved diagonally.

“400? Isn’t that about the same number as the dead that invaded Ground’s Nir before? Can they send in that many for turn after turn?”

As expected, defeating the Underworld was not going to be easy.

A direct confrontation would only wear down the living until they were pushed back.

“How many do they have in all? Try to take those on normally and there’d be no end to it. Filinion’s recovery potions couldn’t keep up.”

“That heat beam that shot down the Thousand Dragon came from…even further back there, right? We need to find their secret before the second shot is fired, but the problems just keep piling up.”

Judging by eye, it was somewhere between five and ten kilometers away.

It felt like the thick beam of heat itself had been fired upwards from beyond the horizon.

And even while hiding in the dips, they were not blessed with enough fortune to walk all the way there while avoiding so many eyes. They would definitely be found as things were.

However…

“It looks like there are some things moving separately from the marching troops. See, it’s those spider-crab fusions. Arachnes, were they? Y’know, the contraptions.”

“Hm? What are they doing here inside their own base?”

“Squeal. It looks like they’re closing up the wounds.”

Boo Boo said it that way because of the red, boiling lava erupting from here and there on the giant fish-like Underworld. It did indeed look a lot like those Arachnes were using their thread to sew up the gaping wounds.

“But, Filinion, what about them?”

“I don’t know if it’s broken or what, but there’s an abandoned

one flipped upside-down with its belly showing."

They all exchanged a glance and then slowly approached it.

The large contraption was easily taller than a human. It overall looked a lot like a spider, but the belly was made to open and close like a crab carrying its eggs. Beatrice stuck her rapier in the half-opened door and tired prying it open. They found a fairly roomy space inside. Instead of a steering wheel or buttons, it seemed to be controlled by several threads strung irregularly around like a game of cat's cradle.

"So is it like a marionette?"

But if they rode in this, they would not be noticed by the marching ranks of troops.

But there was a problem.

"What do we do about Boo Boo? He can't possibly fit in here…"

"Boo. I'm fine on my own. You all can go on ahead."

"No, we can't. Wait here for a second and we'll surreptitiously create a path for you."

At any rate, it looked like the three girls would somehow manage to fit, so they hesitantly climbed inside.

However…

"Mgh. Was there any real reason to cram all three of us in

here? And whose giant ass is this!? The glasses cow's as usual!?"

"If you're talking about my butt, you've completely lost the cow connection! Ah, wait! Blowing on me there is hardly fair! Ah, ahhh!!"

"We can ignore Beatrice since she's basically turned into a bicycle seat, so let's get going. Hmm, I guess you do have to control it like a game of cat's cradle. …But how do you control all eight legs???"

The movements were pretty awkward, but the contraptions started walking forward. Since they managed to avoid toppling over on their first try at piloting it, its pilot assistance must have been excellent.

Armelina sounded pretty excited.

"Oh, I think I've gotten the hang of it. One, two, one, two."

Their field of view was surprisingly narrow for how many eyes it had. It felt like peering through several peepholes lined up in a row and they were pretty sure they would get motion sickness if they did this for very long.

While passing by other identical contraptions and viewing the marching units of 400, the three girls spewed black thread onto non-wounded areas of the rotting Underworld. They did not know how to do it at first, but they once they got used to it, it went much more smoothly. They left woven clumps of thread here and there.

“We have to hide someone as big as Boo Boo, so we need to leave cover for him.”

It was a lot like an irregular rocky area created with a 3D printer and Boo Boo would wait for just the right moment and run from cover to cover. He was still risking his life like this, but they had to view themselves as lucky to have any chance at all of victory.

The Holy Swordswoman’s group noticed something as they moved the eight legs and led the way for Boo Boo.

“Mghgh. Th-those soldiers walk differently from Alpha Zero. If they’re Soviets, then they’ll use different standards and I’ll have to create a whole new flowchart before I can predict when to dodge…”

“Hwah! C-can you at least pull your head out of there before talking, Beatrice!?”

“More importantly, what is that? There’s something weird mixed in there.”

Armelina was right.

Each of the groups of 400 had a single member who as clearly not human. One was a giant quadruped with multiple heads, one was a monstrous bird with the head of a snake, and one was a carnivorous plant that walked on the ground like an animal.

One was surrounded by intense sparks as if its fur was bristling, one had flames coming from its mouth like the top

of an oil field, and a lot of them wore thick armor or carried giant cannons.

“That jumbled sense… I think they really are Soviets and not modern Russians. Those rectangular metal bags might be an attempt at recreating those multiple rocket launchers with the same name as a headband.”[1]

“What does that mean?”

“Well, if you have a big and solid weapon, you normally use it as a shield to protect people, right? You don’t normally place soldiers outside the armor or solid shell as a kind of cushioning made of flesh. …But the Soviets had a tactic called tank desant. They’d cram as many foot soldiers as they could onto the outside of the steel tank and drive right into the vortex of gunfire on the front line. And of course, they’d be blown to bits by the first explosion.”

While he waited for the right timing to run out and then hid behind the black cover, Boo Boo approached the contraptions and whispered to them.

“Boo. They smell familiar to me.”

“Boo Boo?”

“They’re not the same as my ancestors, but there’s still something familiar about them.”

…According to the Sage, “Iberian Orc” did not refer to a pig-faced creature. Iberian Orc were the beings that had gained the strongest muscles and digestive systems after taking in

the strengths of all kinds of plants and animals. And they had supposedly taken many shapes and forms before arriving at the current one.

In that case…

(Does the Underworld have control of the Another Orcs that traveled down a different evolutionary path and ultimately hit a dead end?)

This had nothing to do with Americans or Soviets. What would happen if they clashed with those things was a complete unknown.

Beatrice gasped at this revelation, but things went far further than that.

A wet splat rang out as one of those precious giants was crushed.

This was not the result of a reckless attack from Boo Boo or Beatrice's group. Nor was it an incomplete soul self-destructing.

"Wha-…?"

At some point, a single figure had risen up within the ordered ranks.

But it was not a human.

It had a head like a lobster and a pair of arms made from octopus or squid tentacles wrapped around each other. Its

entire body was covered in creepy scales and a sticky-looking liquid protected it from drying out.

That had done it.

That monster had done it.

After looking around at the lined-up troops, as if it had lost interest, it undid its tentacles and began squeezing and crushing them one after another. The victims showed no sign of resisting. Not the Another Orc or the soldiers surrounding it. They stood tall and put up no resistance. They did not even flinch when their neighbor's bodily fluids splattered onto them. Like an example of shared responsibility, the entire group of four hundred was eliminated. The sight was enough to make one nauseous.

And it all ended with a single word.

"Next."

It observed and it destroyed.

Some four hundred were killed and some four hundred were spared as it inspected group after group. It was reminiscent of clearing a wheat field early if it was afflicted with mold in order to prevent the damage from spreading to the ground.

"Next."

It did not mind tearing up its own forces.

It seemed to be arrogantly saying it had plenty of resources,

including human resources.

“Next.”

“…Is it culling them?”

“Is it something like leaving only the well-grown ones and then sending them to Ground’s Nir?”

According to Omega and Alpha Zero, when a soul trapped by the Underworld was killed, they were only returned to the Underworld. It was looking like fighting was not the only way for that to happen. If they did not reach minimum threshold that this being wanted, they would be killed before heading out to battle and they would have to redo it all. It seemed possible that some of them would be caught in an endless loop of that.

“Squeal. I kind of feel sorry for them. The killed ones have all their stuff taken by the others…”

“Their results determine where the armor, weapons, and other equipment gather?”

“I-it’s almost like it relies on coincidence to gather the numbers it needs, but then it throws out the ones it doesn’t like and strengthens the ones it does like.”

“If those things on the backs of the big ones really are multiple rocket launchers, the next turn is going to be even more hellish than the last. We need to do something before explosives are raining down over the entire island.”

If the other side was intentionally restricting their numbers, then there had to be a limit to the number their leader could manage at once. For example, maybe the Underworld Lord could only accurately control a single group of four hundred at once. Armelina gulped, and…

“But who does that lobster head think he is lording it over everyone like that…”

“Lording…?”

Beatrice repeated back the phrase Armelina had spat out without thinking.

“…Then is that thing the Underworld Lord???”

If they could defeat him, they might be able to stop the Underworld’s invasion of Ground’s Nir and of earth. But that was the center of the enemy formation. Even if they moved there inside the contraption, they had almost zero chance of successfully breaking through an unknown number of 400-man groups, defeating the big boss, and returning safely.

“We can’t.”

“But…”

“Beatrice, let’s continue toward the back like we planned. We know there’s something there that sickening lobster head doesn’t want seen. Whatever it is, we have a better chance of doing serious damage to the Underworld by destroying it. And we can’t let them target Ground’s Nir with that heat beam antiaircraft blast that shot down the Thousand Dragon. We

need to stop it before the second shot takes out another Break News."

It was not over once they won.

The island's defenses were almost entirely reliant on the Break News. If that antiaircraft weapon took out a paradox or two, that would shift the power balance beyond the point of no return. So they had to destroy that antiaircraft weapon before it fired a second shot.

Also, they could not stab at their enemy in a one-way trip. To return to their original lives and smile with everyone, they could not afford to lose anyone. Besides, if they lost the contraption here, exposed Boo Boo would lose the cover he was using and he would be trapped.

They were reluctant, but they continued on anyway.

As they moved the eight legs and left the dark plain region, they finally managed to escape the eyes of those troops. Beatrice breathed a soft sigh as they descended a gentle slope.

"Nnnh… A-again, Beatrice, stop blowing on me there…"

"Now I'm a little worried about what my face is touching! What is this filling my vision!? God, it's so hot in here. I can't stand it anymore. Bwah!!"

Beatrice opened the door in the crab-like belly and rolled out into the outside world. The rotting flesh ground had a slight muddy stickiness to it. It was probably the stable ground that

had led to that plain being chosen to gather all those people. Here, there were some areas that had melted into a thick, bottomless bog and other areas that had become a large river of orange lava. There was no one here to see them, but they had to contend with the threat of nature(?) now.

She wanted to take a deep breath of fresh air now that she was freed from that cramped space, but it was still unpleasant here. The heat and humidity mercilessly clung to her glossy hair and soft skin.

And as she wiped the dripping sweat from her brow, Beatrice realized something.

It was obviously due to them approaching a lave lake where the many rivers gathered, but she felt the stinging pain of the heat as if she was inside an oven.

She gave the orange boiling lake a puzzled look.

"…? My Fire Resistance isn't working???"

Filinion was oddly pigeon-toed after climbing out and she responded with a question of her own.

"Really? Maybe it has another Element mixed in. You know, something strange like death or darkness."

For one thing, the Underworld itself came from outside the island of Ground's Nir, so there was no guarantee the rules they knew would apply. Just like a meteorite could carry unknown information, the Underworld could include previously undiscovered Elements.

But that could be a good thing.

(There might be some undiscovered Magic here to resurrect the Iberian Orc souls sealed in Boo Boo's Shining Weapon. Or at least the key to finding that Magic.)

"Boo. What is it, Beatrice?"

"It's nothing, Boo Boo."

The red Holy Swordswoman shook her head and gave a smile.

"Wah," said Armelina. "It sure is squishy around here. Not even this contraption can walk."

"Boo. Then I'll carry it for now."

It was almost like he was lifting up an oddly-shaped swing ring or rubber boat. But they would not be able to use this to directly cross the lava lake. For now, the three girls and one pig-faced guy walked alongside the boiling lake on the dark ground that would sink disconcertingly below their feet. The Underworld was strange, but their exploration here was a lot like trekking through the desert at midday. Simply put, the lava was incredibly hot and they had no way of combating it. Sharp bones occasionally jutted out of the black, rotting flesh ground. They gave off a bluish shine, but they also gave off an icy chill. They were like oases dotting the desert.

"Pant, pant."

"Damn… If I'd known this was coming, I would've waited until Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau caught up with us."

“Pant…”

The arrangement of bones seemed different from the normal fish that Haruka the Maid would serve. The ones that curved up overhead like a crescent moon may have been ribs. As her stamina was worn down, the cow clung to one of the chilled blue crystals that rose up like a sharp tower and then she slid down into a sitting position.

The boiling lava lake was right there and Beatrice did understand the feeling, but…

“Should you really be doing that?”

“Wh-wh-why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, the Underworld is rotting everywhere, right? The place probably isn’t all that toxic with the magma sterilizing everything with its heat…but wouldn’t these oases be an exception? So this place might be crawling with all sorts of mold and bacteria.”

“Gyah!? Filinion, you’ve got some kind of sticky mushrooms on your back!! What is this? Is it like caterpillar fungus that absorbs its nutrients from a living creature!?”

“Gyaaaaaaahhhhh!? Get it off! Please get it off of meeeeeeeeee!!”

“This is your life on the line here. Couldn’t you have at least produced something like a matsutake!?”

Just how inconvenient for the living was this field? The cow

swung her cape around to get off the things popping up from it, but that was not enough to ensure her safety.

“Ah!? Th-that’s right. The Undead here are weak to recovery potions. That’s right, that’s right. I just have to increase my life force and defeat them with the power of the immune system!!”

“What exactly are you going to do, Filinion?”

“…If I drink a recovery potion that raises your temperature by about 0.5 degrees, it’s sure to get rid of them.”

“Bfh!?” spat both Beatrice and Armelina.

“Squeal?” said Boo Boo a half-tempo later. “What does that mean?”

“Your confusion is the right response here, Boo Boo! Cow, is that really a recovery potion!? Come to think of it, you mentioned something about an aphrodisiac in preparation for Boo Boo’s birthday party, didn’t you!?”

“Shut up. I don’t want to die yet and I *definitely* don’t want to die covered in mold and with these things swelling up from me! So I’m willing to suffer a bit of embarrassment by putting myself in a mild feverish state that raises my temperature by about 0.5 degrees. Heh heh. Eh heh heh. This is the normal reaction. No one wants to die and, if there’s something I can try, I’m willing to try it. Even if you have to call it ‘The Secret Late-Night 24 Hours of the Feverish College Girl’, I swear I’ll survive

thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiissssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!!”

“W-wah! O-officer!!”

“Stop this, you idiot!!!!!!”

The civil servant embedded her fist of justice in the glasses girl and a test tube filled with an extremely colorful liquid flew through the air. Pink steam burst from it, Filinion writhed on the ground, and she accidentally stuck her head in something that looked like a giant transparent jellyfish or a mushroom umbrella growing from the black rotting flesh.

Beatrice slapped her forehead and summed things up.

“…Is Filinion feeling tired in more ways than one?”

“Doesn’t she know that the fan-service character never lives to the end in a horror movie?”

After failing to crawl on all fours and sticking her butt out at them, Filinion seemed to be trembling. It seemed she knew to provide fan service even after passing out, but…

“Wow, my heart is feeling so refreshed after that hit from a police officer. Look, I feel so light. I guess it really is best for human beings to live an honest life.”

“Waaahh! A translucent Filinion is coming out of Filinion!!!???”

When they saw the satisfied-looking cow, Beatrice and Armelina felt their skin crawl and frantically tried to shove the

ghost back inside her body, but then they felt a very unpleasant sensation through their fingers.

Beatrice's gauntlet covered her hands with metal all the way to the fingertips, so when she grabbed the translucent Filinion, which was as soft as custard, she tore through the shoulder and tore off the arm.

"…(Flap, flap, flap)!!!???"

Beatrice's mouth flapped wordlessly, but the victim herself did not seem to have noticed. In fact, as soon as the translucent version was destroyed, the formless thing was rapidly reabsorbed by the body and Filinion pulled her head out of the giant jellyfish with her butt sticking out.

"H-huh? What was I doing…??? I felt like I had achieved enlightenment, opened my third eye, or flown to a higher stage."

"Heh, heh heh, eh heh heh. Nothing happened. You're fine. You're perfectly fine, Filinion. I'm glad you're okay. Yes, very glad…"

"Hold on a second. Is this what I think it is?"

This time, Armelina crouched down and stuck her head in the jellyfish body growing from the black ground.

And…

"Yeah, I was right. I don't know what it's used for, but this seems to let you move freely as an astral body."

“Eek!? That’s what had happened to me!?”

“Heh heh heh. Aren’t you glad I returned you to normal, Filinion? You should thank me! So, Armelina. What can you really use that for?”

“Doesn’t that depend on how you look at it? Although it’s not that useful since being spotted like this will still raise the alert level. Still, we can look at it like sending out drones that we can afford to have destroyed. If we send the astral body out ahead and search for enemies and traps, we might be able to reduce the risk of instant death.”

While they discussed that, something changed.

It came from the wall right next to them…no, the boulder. The rotting flesh forming those black walls writhed unnaturally and split in two. It was a lot like a strange case opening and removing its contents.

Arms.

Faces.

Boo Boo quickly freed up his arms by throwing away the Arachne contraption he was holding.

“Squeal!? Ghosts!!”

“Wah, wah, wah, wah. Is it more of the Underworld’s dead troops!?”

“Hurry on back, Armelina! If your abandoned body is torn

apart, you won't have anywhere to return to!"

There were fifteen…no, more than twenty of them.

They had likely been young girls to begin with. They had dry hair and skin in severe need of moisturizing. They looked something like well-preserved zombies. What they wore may have originally similar to surgical gowns. Their outfits were no more than a combination of rags and bandages and their only accessories were thick chains wrapped around their torsos and rusted metal shackles and collars. Perhaps to avoid being contaminated by the rotting flesh, they wore something like thick, scratched-up ski boots on their feet, which were oddly out of place with the rest.

And there was one thing that gave off a sticky luster: the marine creatures, such as octopuses and univalves, that were clinging to their dried-out skin.

"Gahhh!!!???"

"Gahhh!!!???"

"Gahhh!!!???"

They rushed in all at once. If they were similar to Elkiad, who had fought so fiercely on Ground's Nir, then this was more than enough of a threat. Beatrice's flowchart to time her dodging only worked on people who followed American military standards, so a straight fight here could lead to a sad farewell with Boo Boo and the others.

However, they currently had healing expert Filinion who was

the strongest when it came to fighting the Undead.

Or that was the theory anyway.

The situation changed when they heard the solid sole of a boot crush the rotting flesh underfoot.

Something rushed toward the bridge in the center of Filinion's glasses.

A sharp blade glinted just a few millimeters away. With her hands shackled and her body wrapped in bandages and the remnants of a surgical gown, a ponytail girl had spun her hips around and swung up her slender leg. No, this was more than just a high kick. Almost like a collapsible knife, a sword wrapped in flames extended out ward from the tip of her toes!?

"Eek!?"

"Idiot!!"

Filinion reflexively tensed her shoulders and froze in place, so Beatrice stomped on her cape to bend her backwards. It was only a partial bridge, but it pulled her down just enough for the blade to slice through empty air and take a few strands of the White Witch's blonde hair with it.

(What was that? It was different from Magic!)

They heard several metallic noises. The dead girl's boot had supposedly completed its kick, but then it wriggled through a complex set of motions. It had contained more than just the

one blade. Red flames, blue ice, yellow wind, and purple poison… Weapon after weapon flipped out and back in like a Swiss Army knife. Finally, a short blade extended from the heel and she pulled her leg back to target Filinion's ample chest.

Beatrice was fairly certain what happened next was a complete accident.

While Filinion was bent backwards and unable to move, a test tube slipped from her fingers and spun through the air, so Beatrice shattered the glass container with her rapier.

Friendly fire did not matter here. This potion was not harmful to the living.

With the sizzling of Chinese cooking, the rag girl's silhouette crumbled away. And when she screamed and tried to grab at them in one last attack, Boo Boo swung his giant Shining Weapon horizontally and launched her into the distance. She had more or less melted and she vanished as if she were trying to enter the upper atmosphere.

Even if someone had an insta-death attack for the Undead, they would still need support if they were unathletic.

"Tch, so you aren't safe if you move up close like with an aircraft carrier!"

That was when a tremor ran through the ground below their feet.

A unpleasant sensation ran along Beatrice's spine.

“Not good. Did the Soviet group in that black plain notice us here!?”

If so and they were surrounded, there was nothing they could do. They had poked at the hornet’s nest. But it was silly to think they could find somewhere to hide in the middle of this commotion.

There was only one way to survive.

“Metal Jet!!”

Beatrice drew her rapier and released a total of eight heat beams. Instead of the approaching dead in rags and bandages, she targeted a bone tower of bluish-white crystal located a short distance away. The attack rushed to the base, broke it, and caused it to topple over and block the way.

That was when the dead Soviets rushed in.

However…

“Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah!! Wh-what is that!? There’s yellow and pink and all sorts of colorful things growing up, surrounding them, and then collapsing!!”

“Mold, it’s mold! That’s what almost killed Filinion earlier, remember? The chilly air created by the bones weakens the heat sterilization of the magma, so those areas become a hotbed for mold and bacteria!”

That would stop the approaching soldiers and Filinion’s recovery potions could take care of the dozen or so bandaged

ones who had broken through the boulder walls.

They thought that would be the end of it.

However…

“Squeal!? There are people coming from the broken tower!”

“You’re kidding, right!? How?”

“Oh, no. The dead are climbing up over the dead that were already crushed. And they keep doing it!! It’s a real version of the death march that clears a minefield by stepping on them all!!”

They were pushing themselves too hard and so they were not moving very quickly, but the group was gradually approaching. Once they passed a certain line, they would push in with the violence of numbers.

“Assault team, advance.”

“Barrier troops, prepare your weapons. Refusing the mission will be deemed a dangerous ideology.”

“They’re giving orders while aiming their guns at their allies’ backs!? What is with these people!?”

At this point, there was no way Beatrice’s group could win by staying here.

They needed to leave here as quickly as possible if they were to survive.

Beatrice used all the information available to her in order to find an answer.

“The lava lake… Since those contraptions were bothering to fill in the wounds, the dead must not be able to wade through the lava. If we travel through there, we might be able to lose them!”

“But how are we supposed to do that? Even in that spider thing, we’d just sink into the lava!”

“How about this? Since those threads were used to cover the wounds, wouldn’t a boat made from them be able to float without melting!?”

With that decided, it was time to take action.

Armelina seemed the best at operating the Arachne, so she took care of that while Boo Boo, Beatrice, and Filinion protected the spider-crab fusion until the small boat was done.

They were a lot more of the dead Soviets who were about to pour in, but there were still a dozen or so of the group in bandages and the remnants of surgical gowns surrounding Beatrice’s group. They wanted to avoid being surrounded and attacked from every direction at once, so it would best if Beatrice used her flames and Filinion used her potions to divide the enemy into groups of three which Boo Boo could take care of. To put it another way, it was all over if they were surrounded.

“Filinion, we can still view this as a fun adventure, right? We don’t have to enter serious mode, do we!?”

“Do not underestimate the Shrine Maiden Princess! Oh, how rare. There’s some Cheerful Alraune here.”

“Is this any time to be gathering plants!?”

“Maybe not, but there’s just so much of it. Oh, dear. And there’s even some Backbone Fish and Medicine Ball Palm. Those fantastic stories about the wind and waves carrying eggs and spores must be true.”

“If you let your greed distract you here, you’ll pay for it when-…no, wait a second.”

Once she realized something, the Holy Swordswoman raised her Shining Weapon rapier and asked just to be sure.

“Cow, you’ve been pretty self-sufficient all the way here, but surely that doesn’t mean you’re running out of materials for your recovery potions, does it?”

“……Whatever are you talking about?”

“Boo Boo! Grab this glasses girl’ legs and shake her upside down! Right this instant!! We need to find out what all she has ASAP!!”

“Squeal? Is that a new health treatment?”

“Wah!? Okay, okay, I’ll admit it! Since everyone was praising me for once, I got a little carried away! I’m sorry!!”

Filinion, everyone’s big sister whose glasses did not come off even while she hung upside down, was shaken up and down by the legs. Her large breasts jiggled and she grew somewhat tearful.

“I just kept using them and, next thing I knew, I was fresh out. Eh heh heh. Isn’t that just the worst? It’s like when you find you’re short on magnum ammo in a zombie hell. Ah ha ha ha ha!!”

“Did you intentionally wait to tell us about this, you dumb cow!? And in the middle of the battlefield!?”

“Has everyone completely forgotten my name!? B-but anyway, I found a lot of the necessary ingredients, so please let me gather them. If I run out of recovery potions, we’re all goners!!”

No one could contain the dead if their supply of recovery potions stopped. This was more important than making the boat, so even Armelina got out of the spider contraption to search for ingredients.

That was when they heard a footstep on the twisted ground.

Armelina immediately raised her metal staff just as a shorthaired Zombie-style girl kicked out the solid sole of her boot with her hands still shackled. And this was not just a sole. A thick metal spike shot out of the heel like a pile

bunker. A dull sound burst out, the Fighter Priest's feet left the ground, and she flew to the side along with the metal staff that had blocked the attack.

The scarlet Holy Swordswoman raised her voice in surprise.

"What!? Someone managed to beat up *Armelina*!?"

"Hey, Beatrice! You weren't judging me in units of cigarette packs, were you!?"

She hopped back to her feet and yelled back, so she was probably fine.

And Beatrice made a mental note that Armelina really hit her stride while using phrases that were a bit outdated in a non-smoking age.

At any rate, this was what happened when Filinion's special move was unavailable even temporarily.

To buy time for the Mixing, Boo Boo and Beatrice also moved forward.

"Come to think of it, don't you specialize in physical attacks, Armelina? Why didn't you train your Elemental Defense?"

"Unlike for you, physical attacks are divided into several categories: impacts, slashing, stabbing, arrows, and more. You can't get 100% resistance to them all. I've trained impacts pretty far, though. I would've broken a bone or two otherwise!"

And there was one more point of interest.

The dead decorated with thick chains and shackles were indeed violent and powerful, but they did not use guns or Magic like Elkiad had. They all used special boots with various mechanical blades hidden inside. The lack of the former was understandable, but what about the latter? If these had originally been humans who arrived in Ground's Nir, they would definitely rely on Magic.

That line of thinking reminded Beatrice of something.

(That's kind of like Abyss…?)

She kept her rapier at the ready and judged her distance from the dead while she spoke.

"Are these *different humans from us*? The ancient ones who created the Ground's Nir armory and Abyss?"

The short-haired dead attacked immediately afterwards.

It was a lot like capoeira or break dancing. She swung her torso around and used both her slender legs to create something like the rotating blade of a lawnmower out of her blade boots. Meanwhile, she aimed for the side of Beatrice's head with an ice-cold blade wrapped in a pale light.

"!?"

But as the Holy Swordswoman gasped, a test tube containing a colorful liquid was thrown over her shoulder from behind. It hit the dead girl and she melted away and was absorbed by

the rotting flesh at her feet.

(She was absorbed…? Does this humus-like stuff suck up the nutrients to begin the recovery phase???)

There was no time to question it.

“This is bad. I kind of am completely out now!”

“What do you mean ‘kind of’!? Be more precise, cow!!”

“U-um, um, I have a decent variation of ingredients, but there’s still nothing I can do since I’m missing the primary piece. If I had just that one more ingredient, I could make tons of those anti tank missiles that work on the Undead but don’t do much of anything to normal people!!”

“What exactly is this last ingredient!?”

This was a pressing situation, so the Holy Swordswoman snapped back in irritation. And Glasses Girl Filinion confessed while tapping her index fingers together in front of her large chest.

“M-Maiden Pheromones.”

Blank expressions appeared on Beatrice and Armelina’s faces and they immediately made up their minds.

“Boo Boo, sorry, but can you hold back the dead on your own for a bit?”

“Squeal!? Exterminating ghosts all on my own is too scary! I’ll

be surrounded if I'm alone!!"

"…My head is starting to hurt, so I'm going back into that contraption to build the boat. You handle the rest."

"Sure thing, Armelina. If I cram this sultry cow in her first aid kit, it'll solve everything, right?"

"Wait, no! This is no joke! I'm serious! Ow, Beatrice, that hurts! Don't shut the lid over those! Y-you'll leave weird marks on that soft and delicate area!!"

"Tell us what you've been doing while we've been risking our lives to buy time, you stupid cow."

"Again, this is based on serious Mixing theory. Um, it might be too complicated for you meatheads who derive joy from swinging blades and blunt weapons around, but the herbs and minerals used in this are too strongly male to mix together properly. That means you need a female catalyst to act as a counter-ingredient, so if you stir up that future philosopher, the universal truths all works out in the end."

"To sum up, you're a giant pervert of a cow."

"Don't you say that with such a serious look on your face! That's fake news!!"

Beatrice threatened her while opening and closing the stolen first aid kit like a ventriloquist dummy.

"…Anyway, we really have to help out Boo Boo who's fighting so seriously out there, so I'd really like a simple answer here:

what exactly do we have to do to get some recovery potions? No sex pheromones have been chemically discovered in the human body, right?"

"It doesn't have to be that exact." Filinion averted her gaze while continuing to tap her index fingers together. "Um, b-basically, a certain amount of a maiden's sweat should work since it has a bunch of stuff mixed together in it. Heh heh, eh heh heh…"

"…"

"Wait, no fire to the face!! B-blood won't work as an ingredient!!"

Beatrice approached Armelina who was moving the spider legs to take up the best position.

And they reached their conclusion.

"In that case, we need to discuss who can sweat the most efficiently."

"Eh?"

"That's right. Beatrice and I get regular exercise, so we would be pretty inefficient. That dumb cow starts gasping for breath at the drop of a hat, so I think she would be best for this."

"Eh? Eh?"

"C'mon, you're the one that brought it up, so hurry up and do some squats, sit-ups, or pushups."

“C’mon, you’re the one that brought it up, so hurry up and do some squats, sit-ups, or pushups.”

“Ehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!? All you did was make me confess things that only make my own life wooooooooooooooooooooooorse!!”

Boo Boo was still desperately working to hold back the dead and Armelina was busy using the contraptions black thread to make their escape boat. That meant Beatrice had to get to work as the monster drill sergeant whipping the drop-out soldiers into shape in time for the national tournament.

As for Filinion, the main cannon they had to rely on…

“Pant, pant.”

“You’re the one that chose squats, so do them right. Gently bend your knees and drop your hips straight down.”

“Ahhhhh. I-I didn’t choose them because I wanted to. It’s just that sit-ups and pushups meant lying down on this squishy rotting flesh, while you can do squats while standing up…”

“Oh, just shut up. Now hurry, hurry, hurry!!”

“Wait, don’t circle behind me and pin me like this, Beatrice! Eh? Ah? You’re forcing me!? Are you forcing me to move my hips up and down!?”

Filinion was forced through the exercise in a way that would make a sports gym instructor feel faint if they saw it. The large things forming her body shook up and down quite a lot, which

really pissed off the person who was lacking (in confidence?).

“Okay, that should do it. Your glasses have fogged up, so you must’ve warmed up.”

“Ahhh…”

Finally freed, Filinion could not even support herself on all fours. She partially bent her arms and pressed her face against the dirty rotting flesh while sticking her butt up in the air like a table with a broken leg. She just barely managed to keep her knees on the ground while her thighs trembled.

The equivalent exchange for that hard work meant test tubes full of colorful liquid came out of the first aid kit. The glasses girl’s invincible time had finally returned.

“P-pant, take this.”

“Wait, you idiot! Throw them properly, you out-of-fuel cow!!”

She had put in the most work, but she received the worst treatment to the very end. It seemed human rights were not guaranteed in a foreign world. With her hips weak and trembling, she entered an oddly sexy pigeon-toed pitching form and cleanly annihilated all of the Undead causing so much trouble.

“Squeal. Did you get rid of the ghosts? Are they gone?”

“Come to think of it, this can’t be fun for the dead.” A distant look entered Beatrice’s eyes. “They’re bossed around by the Underworld and then driven back by a cow.”

But it was not over yet.

The moldy soldiers were swarming over from the collapsed tower of blue bone. They had cruelly crossed the poison bog by walking on the corpses of their comrades, but a win was a win regardless of what method they used to do it. Beatrice's group could not stick around.

Then they heard a decisive rumbling.

An especially overwhelming enemy – one of the Another Orcs from a different evolutionary path than Boo Boo – was a giant wolf with multiple heads and intense electricity running through its fur. It trampled over the other soldiers and crossed the mold hotbed.

"Wah, wah, wah. It's like a noble gentleman placing his cloak over a puddle to escort a lady!"

"Isn't this backwards, though!? Why is the giant weapon carrier walking over the soldiers!?"

The Fighter Priest watched in shock even as she worked, but once that thing got across, the situation would change. If that giant thing charged in, they would be knocked into the lava lake before they could dodge. When they had poor footing and had not analyzed this enemy's movements, they needed to avoid a direct fight.

"The black thread boat is done! Everyone get onboard!!"

Armelina opened the crab belly door and rushed out before hopping into the black boat floating on the lava. Beatrice and

Filinion were somewhat slower because they were secretly waiting to see if the boat would burst into flames and sink.

Boo Boo was the last onboard and the boat remained stable.

The extremely-evolved quadruped was running toward them.

“Wait, do we have a rudder? I’m not going to stick my Shining Weapon into the lava!”

“Beatrice, use some fire Magic! Think of it like a rocket engine!!”

The many-headed wolf with sparking fur had just reached the edge of the lake.

The blast of fire from Beatrice’s rapier scored a direct hit, so the great beast lost its balance and plunged right into the burning orange lake. A scorching wave nearly hit them, but the recoil sent the boat forward. They wave landed just out of range and the black boat began safely cruising away from danger.

It seemed the veteran dead really could not cross the lava lake.

The Party finally breathed a sigh of relief.

And then the dead Soviets all raised assault rifles with white bone stocks.

This was probably not a gun salute.

“Prepare to fire!!”

“Hit and we’ll break open the battle rations. If you want dried fruit and chocolate, aim straight ahead.”

“Gyahh!! Armelina, hurry up and turn that metal staff into some kind of shield!!”

“Wait, I’m supposed to block all of that myself!?”

“Ah.”

“I still haven’t grasped all of this! Help me process this one thing at a time, Beatri-…”

“RPG!!”

Needless to say, that did not stand for role playing game.

“Bfh!? There’s no way I can block something like that!!”

Armelina’s eyes widened when she saw the world’s most famous anti-tank rocket that flew in a spiral. Without being told, they all got down in the bottom of the boat while the explosives passed by overhead.

Part 4

Incidentally, the range of rifle bullets and rockets was limited, so moving the boat away took them out of danger. Although this brought their focus onto the overall scale of the Underworld that supported the lava lake. Just the surface was this large.

“I’m not seeing any more of those multiple rocket launchers with the same name as a headband, so we should be fine this far out…”

Even though they had escaped such a desperate situation, the time that followed was so flat and uneventful that a mood of boredom quickly set in.

They crossed the hot and humid lava lake in the black thread boat.

“Again, normal recovery potions don’t have my sweat in them. That was only necessary for a specialized anti-Undead potion and that was the easiest female catalyst to acquire given the circumstances.”

“After seeing that, I’m kind of afraid of your recovery potions, Filinion.”

“It’s like the stories of passing off earthworm meat as burgers. I’m going to hold off on the swallowed potions for a while.”

“Also, don’t treat it like it’s something dirty. Especially after it saved your life! Besides, if you listed out all the ingredients of a normal recovery potion, it would be pretty nasty too. There’s tons of insect larvae and fish guts in there!!”

"…If only it could have been tears instead."

"If it could have, I bet you would've blown smoke into my face. You barbarians really scare me sometimes."

While the boat was propelled forward primarily by Beatrice's flame Magic, that conversation seemed to be set to loop over and over again. No one expected to find something pleasant when peeking inside a witch's pot, but it was apparently still a major shock.

"Boo. So what ended up happening? Does Filinion's sweat have the power to purify ghosts?"

"Yes, yes. Now that's the clean kind of image I want. This is something noble, like a holy cloth used to wipe off the skin of a god or a buddha. Or like a holy relic!"

"If that's how it works, I can make a protective charm. As long as I have Filinion with me, I'll be fine all alone at night!"

"Cow! I won't forgive you if you give Boo Boo some weird fetish!!"

For a while now, Filinion had been softly jiggling up and down.

"Hold it, Filinion. What are you sitting on?"

"Oh, this? I brought that astral projection jellyfish with me."

"We don't even know if it's really a jellyfish, so how can you just sit on it…?"

“And even if it was a normal jellyfish, wouldn’t sitting on it get you stung?”

They could not do anything until they had finished crossing the lava lake, so it might indeed be a good idea to scout out ahead using the astral bodies that would only return to their physical bodies if they were destroyed.

“With only lava in every direction, we probably don’t have to worry about our defenseless body being attacked. So I’ll be going. Eiyah!”

Filinion got on all fours, stuck her head into the transparent blob, and was summoned up to heaven.

(That’s fine, but isn’t she embarrassed by the way her hips are sticking out and twitching like that? Her butt is the peak of the mountain there.)

“Is something wrong, Beatrice?” asked Filinion’s astral body.

“N-no, nothing at all! Come back with good news, okay!?”

“???”

Translucent Filinion tilted her head in confusion and ignored gravity as she crossed the lava lake.

But not even thirty seconds later, the glasses girl on all fours pulled her head out from the jellyfish.

“H-huh!? What, were you already found and killed…?”

“Hey, Filinion…”

“No, no, you don’t get a turn yet! We don’t have anything else to do on the boat, so I can try this as many times as I want! Yes, it’s all about trial and error!!”

“Your reflexes have always been terrible, so whether you’re an astral body or not, won’t this trial and error be nothing but death after death?”

Armelina’s warning fell on deaf ears.

Filinion kept sticking her head inside the jellyfish and then pulling it back out, but it did not seem she was accomplishing much. Yes, if you tried to overcome a tricky part through trial and error without coming up with a plan first, you were only wasting your time.

And then Boo Boo delivered the finishing blow with a hand over his mouth and a tilt of the head.

“Squeal. She’s see-through, but you can still see her, right? So if she keeps poking around on the shore like that, won’t it cause a commotion like she’s disturbed a hornet’s nest?”

“…”

“…”

“Wait, stop! What are you doing!? Why are you shoving me out of the way as soon as I got back!? Beatrice, Armelina, if you keep this up, I’ll fall out of the boat!!”

“Gwah! This is supposed to be punishment, but her ass is so big it keeps knocking me out of the way!? Does no good deed go unpunished in the Underworld!?”

“I’m not exactly delighted about winning like this, you know!?”

However, no matter who they blamed, the alert level would not change.

The most resistance Beatrice could manage was somewhat diverting the small boat’s destination and approaching the shore a short distance away from the shortest path straight across.

While setting foot on the dark land once more, Armelina gave a warning in a low voice.

“…You really have earned yourself a yellow card this time.”

“Well, that sure is weird. Is that any way to treat the MVP who has defeated the most enemies because Recovery Magic is the best against the Undead???”

Now that they had plenty of recovery potions, the atmosphere had changed from a desperate fight to a fun adventure. The sloppy course change must have not helped much because the humans wearing thick chains and rusty shackles were wandering along the path ahead, but they were nothing to fear with Filinion’s potions.

Enemies were everywhere up ahead thanks to her haphazard trial and error, but they fortunately had not located Beatrice’s

group hidden behind a rising piece of rotting flesh.

“(It would be a real pain if we were surrounded. Let’s defeat just their lookouts and keep moving.)”

The Holy Swordswoman poured one of the White Witch’s test tubes over her rapier’s skinny blade, swiftly approached from behind a dead human in shackles and rags that seemed to have originally been a surgical gown, covered their mouth, and sliced through their neck, which more or less made it dissolve. She did not give them a chance to use their Swiss Army knife boots.

The girl set down the dead human who was crumbling away without even bleeding and she gestured Boo Boo and the others over.

“That clearly isn’t something a *Holy* Swordswoman should be doing.”

“By the way, the ancient humans haven’t been using any Magic at all, have they?”

“Well, they haven’t crossed between worlds since they’re the original people of this world. Without the ability to reassign Experience Points, I would guess they developed some other techniques instead.”

“Yeah, like those weird boots. I’d rather not find out what each individual blade does. For that matter, these are the people who designed the giant armory and Abyss, right? Maybe we should count ourselves lucky that they haven’t

brought out laser cannons and railguns."

They could actually start observing their surroundings at this point and Beatrice realized that the ground below their feet came in a number of varieties: areas that provided solid footing, wounds that spewed magma, bogs that had completely rotted, and scab-like areas that were at the midpoint between the heat and cold.

The flesh had been torn away in some areas, leaving a cave-like opening.

"So not all the wounds have that lava blood flowing out of them."

"The lava is like red blood, isn't it? So are these openings ones that have stabilized, like a piercing?"

"Half-healed scabs will have a clear fluid leak out instead of red blood. Maybe it's a distinction like that?"

They were curious about the inside of the Underworld, but the source of the heat beam that had shot down the Thousand Dragon came first.

And as they walked on an on while defeating the ancient humans with Filinion's help, their destination eventually came into sight.

"That's the area where the heat beam antiaircraft blast came from, isn't it? I'm glad we got here before it fired a second shot."

“Squeal…” Boo Boo placed a large hand over his mouth. “But there’s nothing there.”

That was right.

They had expected to find some kind of special organ like a whale’s blowhole, but there was nothing there. They only saw something like a slight hill. It was not made of living or rotting flesh; it seemed closer to a dark and hardened scab.

Beatrice put her hands on her hips and sighed.

“So the question isn’t ‘what’ did it; it’s ‘who’ did it. It seemed to be Magic, so did whoever-it-was leave on their own two feet after shooting down the Thousand Dragon?”

“Boo, maybe we should look around in case they left footprints or scraps of food.”

“No, it’s too soon to say for sure. How about we try digging a bit into that scab hill? There might be something hidden inside.”

As Boo Boo had pointed out, they could always choose to track their target using hunting techniques. Disturbing any crucial hints would only leave them wandering aimlessly, so Beatrice’s group first took Screenshots of the hill’s surface. Only then did they stab into the scab hill. It felt harder than dried mud, but not as hard as stone or rock. It was a solid mass, but it came apart pretty easily.

“Is it cooled and hardened lava?”

“It’s hard to say when we’re dealing with a mysterious creature in a foreign world.”

Beatrice and Armelina were doing most of the work. Filinion’s Shining Weapon was shaped like a first aid kit, making it unsuited for digging, and she was still a dumb cow even if she was the strongest when it came to the Undead, but since they could not trust her to keep an eye on their surroundings, they had Boo Boo guarding them.

That left the cow with nothing to do.

“Oh, there’s a lot of stuff in here. And there are plenty of glowing stones mixed in.”

“Filinion, keep an eye on our surroundings. Who knows when more of the dead will show up.”

“What is this? It looks a lot like a Red Vibration Crystal, but it comes from the Underworld. But, but. If the components are similar enough, I might be able to get it to work. Where did I put that reagent?”

“Cow.”

“Beatrice, can’t you dig more over here? Yes, here. If your rapier’s sheath is just going to hang at your hip, hand it here so I can dig with it. See, like this. Here, here! Wow, look at it all. Now that’s what I call a successful dig! I really have a knack for-…”

Before she finished speaking, something red hot rose from beyond the scab.

She had gone too far and the red blood was seeping out.

“Oh, no! Get down, Boo Boo!!”

“Squeal!!”

On Miss Armelina’s accurate advice, Everyone’s Mascot: Boo Boo widened his eyes just before a violent eruption. Much like a geyser, an orange and sticky liquid burst vertically from the crack in the ground.

And as usual, the Holy Swordswoman grabbed at the White Witch.

“Tell me: are your brains contained in your right breast or your left breast!?”

“It’s true I screwed up, but can I say one thing!?”

“Now those dead Soviet soldiers are going to attack us again! We need to get away from here!!”

The black ground was shaking, but was that due to the magma or the footsteps of an approaching army?

The lava was not going to stop after the initial eruption, so they had to move away before they were caught in a newly-formed lava river. Even this was better than having solid rocks blasted up with the eruption and then raining down with greater speed than a bullet, but…

“Squeal. Is this what that orange light was?”

“You mean someone intentionally stabbed a sword or something into the Underworld so its blood would erupt out?”

If that hill had been a giant scab, then it was actually a decent guess. Of course, there might be some other process that gathered, aimed, and fired the ultra-high pressure blood.

The Holy Swordswoman spoke in a daze while the dead pressed in from the dark horizon like a large wave.

“But who exactly fired it at the Thousand Dragon!?”

“Is this any time to sit around thinking!? We need to hide before that army gets here!!”

As soon as they said that, there was a blinding flash of light and a deafening blast. Something swept across the dark night sky with enough force to blow away the lava eruption. Instead of targeting Beatrice’s group, it passed over their heads and mercilessly burned away a distant area.

There was nothing left.

It swept across from right to left. That great firepower instantly wiped out an army of the dead so large that even Filinion had decided to avoid them despite her recovery potions.

“What a pain. I see you all are as noisy as ever. No one would ever guess you were infiltrating enemy territory. I’ll admit I would be impressed if it turned out you were intentionally using your fun adventure to confuse the enemy into making

mistakes.”

And there was a voice.

That beautiful voice sounded a lot like Beatrice’s, but it had a darkness woven in.

It was a problem that this person had even managed to get this close.

And it was catastrophic that she was standing in a blind spot.

“The…Sage!?”

“Hi, Boo Boo. We have a way of meeting each other in the weirdest places, don’t we?”

Part 5

She was the one who had brought Magic and the Gates to humanity.

By freely reapplying her Experience Points, she had almost a complete mastery of Magic.

And she looked far too much like Holy Swordswoman Beatrice with her red and silver hair, scarlet armor, and pure white

miniskirt.

"…Why are you here?"

"I wasn't aware I needed anyone's permission."

"To put it more simply, which side are on you on right now!? *The living or the dead*!?"

Yes, that was the problem.

The Sage had gone missing at the end of the Abyss battle and no one had known if she was alive or dead. And this was the Underworld where the souls of the dead were reused. If the Sage was still alive, she would be acting under her own will, but if she had already died, they would have to view her as a pawn of the Underworld.

Defeating the dead Soviets was not enough to prove her allegiance. The Underworld could recapture and reuse dead souls as many times as necessary, so those might have been abandoned once to earn the trust of Beatrice's group.

"Were you thinking this couldn't be much worse, Beatrice?"

"…"

"And does it really matter which it is? Whether I'm acting under my own will or being controlled by someone else's, did you really think *I* would ever be on your side?"

Beatrice gulped.

The Underworld had control of the old soldiers from Elkiad in their prime. If the Sage was also their enemy, then they would have the full all-star roster that had attacked the Iberian Orc village.

“Honestly, what in the world are you doing…?”

Then a new voice reached their ears.

It was a short girl with long blonde hair, white skin, and long and pointed ears. She wore a green dress cut low enough to show off not just her cleavage but all the way down below her navel. And she held a Shining Weapon that looked like a twisted staff or a bow.

“You act all cold and calculating, but you always give priority to your adlibs and teasing. It makes my head hurt. Sage, we don’t gain anything from confusing them, do we?”

“Royal Elf Sibyl…” This time it was Armelina who opened her mouth. “Did you escape the inn during the confusion with the Underworld?”

“Please do not turn such lowly suspicions toward someone with the blood of the noble forest rulers flowing in her veins. For one thing, you were the ones that arrested me, so you had a duty to ensure the safety of your prisoner. A foolish human who neglected that duty has no right to accuse me of anything.”

Sibyl gave an arrogant laugh.

…Unlike the Sage, her survival had been confirmed, but what about now? Couldn’t she have lost her life when the Underworld attacked the inn town and couldn’t she have had her chest pierced by the Sage’s hand if the other approached her while pretending to still be alive?

There was no way to tell.

The distinction between the living and the dead was too unclear here in the Underworld.

Meanwhile, Sibyl placed her hands on her slender hips and gave them an utterly exasperated look.

“We came to the heat beam’s source because we thought there might be some trace of who fired it…but it looks like that was wasted effort. Apparently, foolish humans aren’t even tactful enough to preserve the scene.”

“No, Sibyl, there are a few photos inside their Shining Weapons. And with no signs of modification. Let’s use those to try tracking down whoever fired it. We might just be able to find the Underworld Lord without resorting to wandering around randomly.”

“Wha-!?”

Beatrice belatedly grabbed her rapier’s hilt, but she could not detect any kind of change. The Sage had accessed that supposedly inviolable terminal device that managed Beatrice’s Magic and then extracted some data. This was different from the old soldiers of Elkiad who had willingly handed control over to their superior officer.

(How far does her technological skill go!?)

“Squeal… Abyss mentioned that Underworld Lord too. But who are they?”

“The source of it all, Boo Boo.” For this question alone, the Sage immediately replied with kindness in her voice. “Not that I can act all full of myself on this one. To be completely honest, the elder and I hadn’t seen past Ground’s Nir Abyss, so we never predicted the Underworld’s existence. It was a complete coincidence that I digitally saved his and the other Iberian Orc’s souls in that Shining Weapon. …That said, I can only say it was fortunate that the Underworld didn’t get a chance to toy with them.”

“Why…are you here?”

“Now.” Her sincerity was suddenly muddied with mockery. “Let me ask you instead: *what did you set foot in the Underworld to do*?”

“…”

Did that mean they were thinking the same thing?

Or was even this part of the Underworld Lord’s deception?

“The only people who can touch the Iberian Orcs’ souls are me, who spent so much time with them, and Boo Boo, their proper descendent. I will not allow anyone else that privilege. I don’t know who this Underworld Lord is, but if they insist those souls belong to them, then I will unconditionally eradicate them.”

She must have had no more business here because the Sage turned her back on Beatrice’s group.

“Don’t die, Boo Boo.”

"…Squeal."

"We might be able to save the elder and the others after dealing with this Underworld mess, but I'm afraid of losing the Shining Weapon their souls are sealed inside. So make sure that doesn't happen."

Part 6

At the Detached Magic Palace in Roppongi, Tokyo, the evening scene had been destroyed.

For example, the large living room's thick bulletproof glass windows were shattered, thee picture frames on the wall were crooked, the carpet had been torn up and blown away, and the sofa and tables were flipped over. Red liquid was splattered on the walls and floor and what looked like bullet holes had somehow ended up on the ceiling.

Nothing there moved of its own volition.

The wind entering through the broken windows was so refreshing it seemed out of place and the flowers in the shattered pots on the windowsill swayed emptily. There were several silent things strewn about. One of those was wearing a maid uniform and intellectual glasses, leaning limply against a bookcase with her butt pressed against the floor, and

holding a small piece of precious metal in her hand.

The thin chain of a pocket watch slipped from her weak grip and onto the floor.

The shock of falling to the trampled floor caused it to pop open. Just like a locket, which could be seen as old-fashioned in an age of digital picture frames and smartphones, it contained a photo inside. No, because thoughtless technological progress had been negligent when it came to security, she may have wanted to keep this truly precious photo near her heart in a safer, analog format.

The photo showed the red dress girl's face.

No hand reached down to pick up the image of her respected and beloved master.

"Hey, sister…"

A weak voice spoke from the middle of it all.

It called out to an unmoving blood-related sister.

"…Wasn't this a battle we weren't supposed to win?"

The voice came from Misoka, the second of the three maid sisters.

She had forced herself to sit on the flipped-over sofa and she rested a mop handle on her shoulder. No, it was technically a handmade weapon with a hammer attached to the end with duct tape. With the help of centrifugal force, that device

could break ribs through the thick plates of a bulletproof jacket. It was a truly devilish product of household items.

Meanwhile, the oldest sister, Iroka, began to move once more after resting all of her muscles. She collected her favorite pocket watch from the floor and spun around one of her stockings that was stuffed with several inferior wristwatches.

“That’s not our fault. We can’t choose what kind of enemy we’re up against.”

“But wouldn’t it have been beautiful if we had met our end while tearfully seeing the lady off to the other world?”

The third sister, Haruka, was on all fours and simply stuck in the space between the TV stand and the wall. Her tiny butt was sticking out and she was too dizzy to move. It seemed everyone’s strong points were different.

“So what do we do now that we accidentally won?”

“Good question. The government cares about reputation enough to use organized violence, so they’ll probably send in an even worse group next.”

If the maids had lost the surprise attack, Kasumigaseki might have been able to accept it. In this case, winning was actually calling in an even greater disaster.

“What’ll it be next? Will they jump straight to the JSDF?”

“It isn’t easy having them act within the country and they still haven’t healed the social wounds they received from losing

against Tselika. I doubt the elites of Ichigaya want to send tanks through the subway tunnels and start a firefight in the middle of Roppongi right now."

"Then what? They can't have the stationed US troops getting involved with one of our top secret problems."

"Maybe the riot police. My guess would be the SAT."

"Sakuradamon's counter-terrorist unit, huh?"

Even the second sister had to smile bitterly at that.

This had honestly escalated beyond the point that some cleverness could get them out of it.

"Either way, there is no point in resisting any longer. Besides, the Detached Magic Palace itself is under the government's direct control."

"But we can't let the lady lose her home here."

"That's right."

"Hey, couldn't we just throw out that assumption about the Japanese government? The affiliation doesn't matter as long as we can protect the lady. And the money made with her Magic and Pieces is in high demand, right?"

"Are you saying she requests to defect?"

"The standard choice would be America or Russia, but she could also go with Italy or France if she wants good food. We

can't get through the next challenge the normal way, so can't we mess with the official registration documents and remake the Detached Magic Palace into something like an enclave? It only has to be a threat at this point, but diplomatic pressure has always been the best way of driving a wedge into Kasumigaseki's gears."

"It's an interesting idea, but will the higher ups really let go of their goose that lays golden eggs?"

"They're trying to kill her themselves."

"That's different from letting someone else have her."

Just as the two maids breathed a heavy sigh, the small butt sticking out from behind the TV began to wiggle around. The youngest sister poked her head out from the gap.

"U-um, Onee-chans?"

"Oh, you're awake, Haruka? Since we so valiantly protected the kitchen like you insisted, could you show some respect by whipping up some food real quick?"

"I can, but, um, can I make a silly suggestion first?"

"What is it?"

They were all in this together, so the second sister casually urged her on and the youngest sister hesitantly spoke up.

"Um, instead of defecting to some other country, could we maybe turn the Detached Magic Palace itself into the world's

smallest country?”

Time briefly stopped.

That opinion had caught the other two completely off guard.

“You mean we would be breaking the Vatican’s record?”

“If anything, it would probably be more like Monaco or the Cayman Islands.”

“If only something like that was so easy to do.”

“We’d honestly probably have better odds getting into a fight with the SAT.”

Iroka and Misoka laughed together for a while.

“…But it’s an interesting idea. The lady alone is responsible for 15% of the country’s national tax income. With that kind of economic effect, forming the world’s smallest independent state might not be that farfetched.”

“Plus, she needs to spend some of those assets on herself. Now, where did I put that international standard electronic format?”

Part 7

They had run across several unexpected accidents, but Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others could not stop. Filinion's idiocy had given away their position with a major eruption. The Sage had gotten rid of the dead Soviet troops, but it was doubtful that was all of them. It would be safest to move away before a second or third 400-man unit was sent in. Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina especially needed to hurry since they came from earth and thus had a time limit. A few days might seem like a long time, but it was nowhere near enough given the overall size of the Underworld. To survive, they had to keep in mind how long it would take to get back, not just reach their destination.

Whatever the case, they could not waste time.

"Based on the nuance of the term, the Underworld Lord seems like a core or controller. Of course, it's possible that defeating the big boss won't stop the facility from running."

"Since we're after the same target, won't we just be following after the Sage?"

The Fighter Priest and White Witch discussed the issue like that.

And they were still working under the assumption that the Thousand Dragon had been attacked for a good reason.

"Oh, it's another one of those jellyfish. Let's use the astral body to scout things out ahead while we go."

"Don't you dare, cow."

“Don’t you dare, cow.”

Even if they were following the same path, Beatrice did not see working with the Sage and Sibyl as an option. Who could say when they would lose control and start a real fight to the death before even reaching the Underworld Lord?

After walking a while, their destination came into view.

A shark fin rose up like a mountain in the distance.

“Squeal?”

After twitching his large nose to gather as much information as possible, Boo Boo tilted his head.

“I think the ghosts have stopped showing up.”

“M-maybe the Sage already defeated them all? She did say some dangerous things about ‘eradication’.”

“…”

The Sage had mastery of all Magic through reallocating her Experience Points and Sibyl could freely choose and materialize residual thoughts. If they were on a rampage as the Underworld Lord’s enemy, no battle force could be more reliable.

…But that was only if they really, truly were the Underworld Lord’s enemy.

(I just hope the Sage and Sibyl didn’t just redirect the Soviet

troops' Hate values onto us, move out ahead, and then rewrite the tracks leading to the Underworld Lord.)

Beatrice had a simple reason for holding that fear. They were following the small tracks left in the Screenshots and on the ground, but they never seemed to catch up with the Sage or Sibyl.

"…This is weird."

"What is, Beatrice?"

"I mean…even if the Sage and Sibyl left before us, could they really have gotten so far ahead that we can't see them on the path to that shark fin?"

Their footing had grown unsure. It was not a place someone would choose to walk through.

"Uuh… The rot here is really bad."

"Squeal. It looks like it sinks down even more, so maybe we should turn back. I know there's nothing you can do if you start struggling only after your feet are stuck in a bottomless bog."

But there was no need for that. The giant shark fin jutted straight up past a small hill of piled-up black mud. That holy ground would be nigh impossible to climb.

And they saw something odd as they approached.

"What is that? There's something like barnacles covering the

top.”

“No, wait, Beatrice. Keep in mind the size and scale. They look small from here, but wouldn’t they really be bigger than a domed stadium?”

“But in that case…what are those pure white plates for?”

White Witch Filinion and Boo Boo tilted their heads together.

Beatrice brought a hand to her chin for a bit and she finally muttered a term.

“…Parabolic antennae?”

“?”

“The entire fin is a giant broadcast tower.”

It was not clear until they got close.

Had the Thousand Dragon been shot down for seeing this from the air?

“And it’s a massively powerful one, just like a radio telescope. You can tell by monitoring the air with your Shining Weapon. This regular noise may be the broadcast signal.”

“B-but what are they accessing with it!? Does it connect the Underworld Lord to the Underworld itself!?”

Perhaps so, perhaps not.

Beatrice's greatest fear lay elsewhere.

"Until now, we've been assuming the Underworld needs direct access to the Ground's Nir-side Gates to perform a cyber attack, but what if that wasn't the case?"

"!?"

"We might have miscalculated the time limit. If they're attacking even now using that signal, they might gain a foothold for an invasion of earth sooner than we thought…"

That truth was spread out before their eyes.

If the Thousand Dragon had been able to attack with her ultra-high pressure water breath, that black Dragon would have first destroyed that obvious landmark even if she had no idea what it was for. That might have destroyed the broadcast fin and ended the cyber attack on the Gates.

"We have no material evidence, but it's probably worth destroying. I just hope there aren't similar fins and parabolic antennae all over the place."

"The loss of those eyes in the sky is hurting more and more… Walking all across the Underworld with all those troops everywhere simply isn't realistic. Besides, taking care of the broadcast tower antennae won't solve everything."

They would start with this one. No matter how pressing the situation, only certain ruin awaited them if they did not deal with the threat before their eyes.

But the Holy Swordswoman should have realized something.

If the alternative was losing the foundation of their strategy, the Underworld was bound to resist with all their might.

The noise that reached the girl's ears was a wet and sticky sound very different from the dead and their dried-out skin.

Her nose detected an odd smell like a rocky beach or a rotten liquid.

Something was different from the previous unreality where the dividing line between the living and the dead was so vague. This was a kind of "flesh" that could never be found on a human but was too raw for the dead. And that presence pressed in like a solid wall.

Unable to bear it any longer, they all looked straight up.

Just then, something sliced through the sky.

"!?"

Boo Boo was already swinging around his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon, but it was stopped partway through as if something had tangled around it. The objects wrapped around it looked somewhat like ropes or chains, but they were something else. The things looked a lot like octopus or squid tentacles with countless squirming suckers. Filinion cried out in fear.

"From above!? Did that come out of the vertical side of that fin!?"

Not even an Iberian Orc's great body was enough to regain his freedom.

Beatrice swung her blade form the side.

"Melt Cutting!!"

The red-hot blade finally severed them, but the tentacles felt no pain and snapped back like stretched rubber.

And they led to…what was it?

The tentacles wrapped around each other to form something like an arm. The head was somewhat like a lobster's. The scaly skin crawled, produced a creaking sound similar to some kind of carapace, and was all wet with a clear, sea-smelling liquid. It seemed to be a single body constructed by forcibly sewing together the corpses of several marine creatures.

It was actually creepier that it had a full body and walked around on two legs. There was something fundamentally different about it compared to the dead who relied on their bodies from life. Boo Boo naturally opened his mouth.

Yes, they had seen this once before.

This utterly arrogant monster had judged and crushed the 400-man units and the Another Orcs who had each taken a different evolutionary path for the land, sea, or air.

"The Underworld Lord…!?"

There was no response.

With a sticky sound, the arm of wriggling tentacles swung horizontally. A frightening saw seemingly made from shark teeth appeared from within.

That alone had already settled it.

Just by producing his weapon, that lord of all death violently shook the ground. The enormous fin tilted disconcertingly.

They could see now why the Underworld Lord had appeared on his own.

The tilting of the fin broadcast tower showed just how much damage he could do to those reliant on death. If the lord went all out, all of the dead who served him could be blown away. So the Underworld Lord would act alone.

That was how much power he contained inside.

Beatrice and Boo Boo raised their Shining Weapons, but oddly, it was a completely different problem that came to Beatrice's mind.

(We came all the way here, but we never caught up to the Sage or Sibyl. Did they really rewrite the trail they used to track him?)

Meaning…

(The rails were changed somewhere and something was twisted. If the Underworld Lord and we are gathered here, then where did the Sage get off to!?)

Part 8

The corners of the Sage's lips twisted up.

She had escaped the eyes that monitored everything here.

"Hmm, I see. *So this is it.*"

Part 9

Now that it had begun, they had to go all out if they wanted to survive.

Setting aside finding a method of releasing the Iberian Orc souls, the odds were good that directly defeating the Underworld Lord would put a stop to the invasion of earth by the dead.

The many whooshing sounds were a lot more like swinging whips than blunt weapons.

What the Underworld Lord held was less a weapon and more

a torture or execution device: a giant saw made from rows of shark teeth. That alone was brutal enough, but something else mattered even more.

“It’s so hard to judge the distance!!”

There was a sudden crash of impact from outside the apparent range.

Beatrice held back the violent rows of teeth with her rapier’s hand guard and she clenched her teeth at the tingling pain in her wrist.

The arm was a bundle of several sucker-covered tentacles, so its apparent length and joints were not reliable. The attack could “extend” at seemingly any angle or speed, so it may have been best to see it as a sort of morning star.

Also…

“Let’s support Beatrice. Boo Boo, match my timing!!”

“Squeal. Got it, Armelina!!”

Beatrice bent back from the clash of weapons, so Boo Boo and Armelina cut in from the sides so she was not attacked again. One used a Shining Weapon as thick as a log or steel beam and the other used a war hammer with a beak-like point on the end so its weight could pierce through steel helmets. With their chest and hips working together, they attacked from either side like they were closing a giant pair of scissors. It should have been difficult to dodge or defend against, but…

“!?”

Their weapons swished through empty air.

The Underworld Lord had created a humanoid silhouette by forcibly sewing together multiple marine creatures, but now he had vanished into the ground below. It was like holding a handkerchief between your fingers and then letting it drop to the floor. He let his own form collapse and flatten down to dodge the surefire attack.

After missing, Boo Boo and Armelina were wide open to attack and the Underworld Lord “stood” back up right in front of them using jointless movements. The cruel shark-tooth saw gave a roar.

“Why you…!!”

That was when Filinion tossed a test tube full of a colorful liquid. That was the strongest attack against the Undead, but the Underworld Lord dodged it like a disembodied soul given physical form. Only the giant lobster head remained while the torso and limbs lost their form and fluttered around like streamers. He rotated in midair to dodge the test tube and then used that momentum to charge toward the White Witch.

The blade did not reach.

Before it could, Boo Boo recovered and kicked at the rotten soul with the sole of his foot.

The Underworld Lord’s head bounced along the ground like a

soccer ball or something, but it was unclear if this did any damage at all. Were the organs and blood vessels inside even functioning in the first place? When he could tear apart his own body to that extent, it was possible he would be able to move around just fine even if he was dismembered.

And then there was the sole of Boo Boo's foot.

Damage *was* done there.

It was stuck with several sharp spikes resembling small crab pincers.

"Squeal!?"

"Boo Boo!!"

That was enough for something pink and yellow to crawl toward the wound. Some mysterious mold or bacteria was trying to cause the Iberian Orc to rot from within. A single scratch would be fatal here. Beatrice did not have time to hesitate.

"Fire Throw!!"

She swung her rapier and flames rushed out as if from a wound in the world itself. And they rushed toward Boo Boo's feet instead of toward the Underworld Lord. She had to forcibly rid him of those pathogens even as it produced a sizzling sound much like Chinese cooking. Both Boo Boo and Beatrice clenched their teeth. And the Holy Swordswoman raised her voice.

“Done! Filinion!!”

“U-understood!!”

The White Witch tossed a recovery potion to forcibly heal Boo Boo’s nearly carbonized foot. Beatrice knew this was the most logical and efficient course of action and she knew Boo Boo would have died otherwise, but she could not stop the heavy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

And time had not stopped in the meantime.

After “standing back up” with his full body, the Underworld Lord did not hesitate to raise his shark tooth saw. Was he going to throw it from outside its range? Beatrice did not wait around to find out.

“Metal Jet!!”

Eight beams of heat shot out and severed the Underworld Lord’s wrapped-tentacle arms at the base. A muddy liquid spurted out and Boo Boo caught the airborne saw along with the arm still holding it.

He now wielded both the blunt weapon and the defiled saw.

No matter how cruel a weapon it was, it worked to their advantage if they stole it.

Boo Boo forcefully approached with the surrounding air roaring around him, but the Underworld Lord did not appear to be in any pain. He moved as if swinging his arm and the tentacles extended to their original length.

And they were holding something: a spear adorned with lots of dead coral and barnacles. The tip pierced the severed tentacles that continued to thrash around and absorbed all of their disturbing sticky liquid.

Seeing the tentacles dry up was enough to know this weapon carried even more contamination than the saw. He must have learned that the wound given to Boo Boo had been effective. Instead of just skewering a living person, that impure spear would cause them to rot from the inside. To Armelina, it looked even more ominous than a rusty old butcher's knife.

"Oh, no. Does his attack pattern change when you destroy a part of him!? Come to think of it, he only produced the saw after Beatrice cut away the tentacles wrapped around Boo Boo's Shining Weapon!!"

To face Boo Boo and his dual weapons, the Underworld Lord held his spear at about the midpoint so he could swing both the tip and the bottom. It looked like Boo Boo was pushing forward, but he was not doing any real damage. In fact, the lord was jumping back to regain the optimum distance.

"…"

Unsurprisingly, there was no conversation.

Boo Boo and his stolen saw clashed with the Underworld Lord and his spear at high speed. But this was not the end of it. Just as destroying parts of him had changed his attack pattern, it was unlikely this would end as a simple – albeit unusual – physical clash as it had with the saw.

“It’s coming…”

According to Abyss, the Underworld Lord did not hesitate to bring destruction. Robbing bodies of their souls and then enslaving those souls was the norm for him, so he only saw the living bodies as something like an egg’s shell or a vegetable’s skin. It was not that he killed people because he had a reason to; he did not spare people because he had no reason to. He had once destroyed the entire human race in this world and that same policy was now targeted at Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others.

It was an almost refreshing level of evil.

Armelina gave a cry after picking up on a change in his breathing.

“Be careful, Boo Boo. He’s about to move!!”

The Underworld Lord tossed the impure spear straight up and small, pin-like weapons shot out like it was a hedgehog. They had likely been sticky threads to begin with, but their great speed made them as solid as an awl. It did not matter to him that they rained down on him as much as his targets. This fight entirely surpassed the logic of the living.

“Tch!!”

Beatrice immediately swung her rapier and produced explosive flames, but the real problem was not the deadly downpour directly assaulting them from overhead.

What amounted to long, long wires had been scattered all

across the area. And Beatrice's Party could not afford to forget that they were currently standing on an enormous marine creature that produced something other than red blood when injured.

"Not good!!" shouted Armelina.

A moment later, red boiling lava erupted all over. The intense eruption was like an upside-down waterfall and it came with overwhelming heat and a sulfurous stench. They would be helpless if they were caught in that and the Underworld Lord continued his attacks.

Yes, even this was only preparation.

How was it he had shot down the Thousand Dragon while she flew so high in the sky?

"It…can't be…!!"

With an unpleasant sound, a massive amount of lava was condensed into spheres around the Underworld Lord. The many throbbing spheres moved like giant rolling eyeballs and faced the Holy Swordswoman and the others.

His true attack had finally been launched.

The released lava glowed as it sliced through the night air like several laser beams.

Beatrice was already drawing out complex paths with wings of fire and Armelina was making intentionally-fragile metal shields so they would redirect the lava as they were

destroyed. Boo Boo grabbed Filinion by the hips and dove onto the rotting flesh.

It was all a complete mess.

They were not even sure if they were alive or dead. They thought they had safely avoided the attack, but they would have believed it if they were told they had long since been vaporized and were now ghosts thanks to the Underworld's power.

That heat beam anti-aircraft blast had accurately shot down the Thousand Dragon from extreme long range.

And in a single shot.

"Wh-what do we do about that!?"

Armelina sounded completely at a loss for once.

…Perhaps they should have defeated him before it came to this.

Wouldn't it have been best to hold back as long as possible on destroying parts of him and thus letting him change attack patterns? Then they just had to hit him with major attacks from all of them at once to kill him before he could use that special attack.

But since they had come here without knowing how he worked, the Underworld Lord had essentially won from the start. If they let that powerful current push them away, they would be right where he wanted them and suffer a severe

defeat.

His normal attacks were bad enough because they would gradually fill the entire area with lava. That would rob them of footing and cut off any escape. The Underworld Lord had the advantage no matter what.

The ancient humans of this world had had greater technology than on earth, but there had been nothing they could do beyond leaving the task to Abyss, their ultimate weapon. Had there been no hope of overcoming that gap when thoughtlessly challenging him?

As the scarlet Holy Swordswoman wondered that, she heard a very familiar voice.

Yes, it belonged to Boo Boo.

“Squeal… But how did Abyss plan to defeat the Underworld Lord?”

“?”

Beatrice’s slender shoulders jumped.

That casual question had contained a very important meaning.

Yes, Abyss had been meant to battle the Underworld Lord. Whether or not she could have actually won, she would not have even been sent out if she did not stand a chance.

Inside the Labyrinth, Abyss had freely defeated Gimmicks,

earned Experience Points, and acquired various kinds of Magic to obtain even greater power.

But she had been focused on the same thing as Holy Swordswoman Beatrice, White Witch Filinion, and Fighter Priest Armelina: *Magic.*

(What was Abyss trying to do by gaining all of that Magic for herself? She had to have had something decisive beyond being an inorganic doll without a soul that the Underworld could control. But what was it!?)

With a sticky sound, the Underworld Lord's right tentacle arm produced another impure spear covered in coral and barnacles.

"Damn, can we steal the weapon before he can do anything with it!? Like before!!"

"Do you really think we'll have enough of an opening!? And changing his attack pattern even more wouldn't help!"

At this rate, he would launch that same lava attack again.

If they could not escape the enemy's pattern and he attacked again with those heat beam anti-aircraft blasts, they really would lose any place for themselves. A direct hit meant instant death, but the overflowing lava would spread until there was no ground left. Things might have been different with the Ice Waterfall Princess's cooling ability, but she was not with them this time.

(Multiple people working together can use multiple Elements

at once.)

There was no time.

Beatrice raised her rapier again.

(So what is it Abyss has that we don't!?)

The Holy Swordswoman in red armor and a white miniskirt felt like something flashed in the back of her mind.

But before that, the Underworld Lord threw his impure spear and white threads shot out like it was a hedgehog.

Part 10

There was hope.

Where had the hint come from?

"Abyss has learned new Magic. Metal Jet: standby."

…It may have been that voice that monitored Abyss's situation inside the Labyrinth below the island's surface.

"Alpha Eight, barrel. Alpha Nine, shell. Alpha Twelve, sight."

"Data link established. Begin combined action."

…It may have been Omega's tactic that combined the control of several people's Shining Weapons.

"No, Sibyl, there are a few photos inside their Shining Weapons. And with no signs of modification. Let's use those to try tracking down whoever fired it."

…It may have been the Sage's ability to illegally access their Shining Weapons with such ease.

At any rate, the red Holy Swordswoman had reached the following conclusion:

"*A cyber attack*!! Abyss was trying to separate the Underworld Lord from the Underworld to take away his power!!"

"Eh? Eh?"

"Just run. We probably have the best odds in that badly rotted area!!"

As soon as she said that, Beatrice turned around and set things in motion. Boo Boo and the others moved away from the giant fin as if tumbling down the hill of softly rotted flesh. The Underworld Lord pursued them by repeatedly firing highly-compressed lava beams at them.

"We just have to change how we look at this."

While fleeing, Beatrice had more than just tension and fear on her face. She also showed the hope of someone who had a chance at victory.

“Why did the Underworld Lord show up here? He has so many troops and yet he’s personally firing those heat beams, so there must be something inconvenient for him here. And even if that includes the fin broadcast tower or the parabolic antennae covering it like barnacles, those aren’t necessarily the only things!!”

“Then what is it, Beatrice!? You mentioned a cyber attack before, right!?”

“The biggest ability that Abyss has and we don’t is probably the data link between her and the Labyrinth. She was equipped with a high-level wireless communications system from the beginning. The same is true of the Underworld Lord who doesn’t have any real devices. Abyss was meant to fight by severing the link between the Underworld and its lord using an ECM or cyber attack, just like an electronic-warfare aircraft!”

“But what does any of that have to do with what we’re doing here!?”

“The fin is emitting an EM signal for a cyber attack on the Gates and to interfere with Shining Weapons. That means the Underworld must have some kind of internal network for transferring electric signals, right!? I don’t know if it uses nerves or lymph glands, but if we can dig that up, we might be able to hook up our Shining Weapons with a cable and hack in even without a dedicated system like Abyss has!!”

“!?”

“The Underworld Lord showed up because he was afraid of that. And without speaking a word so we wouldn’t catch on to the real reason! That’s also the purpose behind the over-the-top lava attack that can take out even a Break News. And why he exposed himself to danger to lure us into destroying parts of him so he would change his attack pattern. The lord can’t fire that heat beam without repeatedly destroying a part of himself, so he must have wanted to shoot down the Thousand Dragon badly enough destroy his own body. We saw the result, remember? That scab of cooled and hardened lava! There’s a part of the rotting flesh ground we can probably dig up, so he’s trying to cover the data lines with magma and seal it up with new flesh and blood!!”

The Underworld Lord’s greatest attack was the ultra-high pressure lava attack which was also used to camouflage his repair work. But that was strongly dependent on the Underworld it used as a foundation. What if the girls contacted the giant marine creature below their feet and managed to freely control the flow of blood within? They might be able to stop the erupting “blood” no matter where the Underworld Lord stabbed into the ground. If you cut off the water at the purification plant upstream, no water would leak out even if the pipes had ruptured downstream.

“We need to find the contact point that will act as the Underworld Lord’s Achilles’ heel! There has to be one around here somewhere!!”

Several lava beams attacked them from behind. Meanwhile, Beatrice, Boo Boo, and the others ran down a gentle slope formed by especially soft and crumbling rotting flesh.

“There’s a weird smell here,” said Boo Boo with a twitch of his large nose. “It isn’t just rotting flesh or lava. It’s more like… yes, like down where Abyss was…”

“Where, Boo Boo!?”

The Holy Swordswoman followed his gaze and found it.

The rotting ground of the Underworld was especially bumpy and looked like it would begin to bleed and crumble away all on its own. She saw some kind of smooth luster coming from the wound. It was a high-speed cable covered in a white protective material, so it looked horribly out of place in the black and rotted flesh. It was probably made from a powder of a ceramic material or the same white bone as the parabolic antennae. It looked as sinister as a metal skewer accidentally thrown out in the can for raw garbage, but that was the secret the Underworld Lord feared would get out.

Beatrice pulled a Shining Weapon cable out of her pocket and attached it to her rapier. The Sage had combined the pieces of several broken Shining Weapons to increase the processing power and Beatrice herself had connected her Shining Weapon to Abyss to contact her.

This was the same.

The Underworld Lord would not have shown so much fear if this was not possible.

So.

“Connect…”

She sliced through the existing cable and connected her own to it.

They were clearly being targeted while she came to a stop for this work.

“Conneeee

Since he had not, the battle was continuing.

But his greatest weapon had been sealed away. If all he could do was swing around that shark tooth saw or the impure spear covered in dead coral and barnacles, Beatrice's group could handle it. That would mean the end. It was checkmate. Once they fought the old-fashioned way and defeated the Underworld Lord, the invasion of earth would end. And with that direct threat removed, they could search the entirety of the vast Underworld for a method of freeing the Iberian Orc souls.

The Underworld Lord must have viewed the severing of his coordination as destroying a portion of his body because his right tentacle arm wriggled. Several crossbows emerged, but

Beatrice could shoot down the bolts using the various forms of Magic controllable through her Shining Weapon rapier. He was nothing to fear anymore.

Or so she thought.

But a moment later…

“Eh?”

She uttered a puzzled voice.

With far too light a sound, a brutal blade emerged from the center of her chest.

Part 12

It happened so quickly.

And Beatrice should have expected something like this.

All they had done was take away one of the Underworld Lord’s means of attack. The battle was not yet over and you never knew how things would turn out until the very last moment. So if you let your guard down at some point before then, what happened next was only natural.

The attack had come from behind.

The object that pierced through her back and out the center of her chest was as thick as a fingertip. The weapon was covered in an insulating material and the end glistened with a metallic shine. It was the Underworld's data wire that they had undoubtingly believed was their primary hope.

While the Underworld Lord distracted them, it had risen behind the Holy Swordswoman like a cobra and then stabbed through her.

This was a fatal blow from the Underworld itself.

Meaning…

(That was…camouflage? I *hadn't* taken control of the Underworld…?)

"Bea-…!?"

The shocking sight drew Filinion and Armelina's eyes toward the girl's chest, which proved a lethal mistake.

Their enemy had projectile weapons and an attack could come from any direction at any time.

Everything rushed in while their attention was diverted from him.

It all fell apart.

Once one thing broke, it was all over. There was no building

on this or redoing it. They lost everything and received no mercy whatsoever.

White Witch Filinion's neck bone was broken through.

Fighter Priest Armelina's gut was punched through.

There was a high-pitched sound and some sparks. By the time Boo Boo finally knocked down the flying data cable with his giant Shining Weapon, the situation had advanced beyond the point of no return.

The entire area was colored red and filled with a rusty smell. And the girls corpses were cruelly scattered across the ground. The overwhelming silence left no room for speaking.

Death arrived far too suddenly.

There was no time for an emotional or dramatic build-up.

No matter how much work had gone into reaching this point, letting their guard down even slightly had caused it all to fail.

Wasn't this something Boo Boo himself had experienced before? There had been no advance warning of the attack on the Iberian Orc village. He had gone out to play like normal and returned like normal only to find it was already over. That was how death worked. You could not attach unnecessary meaning to it.

"You…"

Several pulleys turned before Boo Boo's eyes as the

crossbows embedded in the tentacles mechanically drew their bowstrings. The straining noise sounded like crude laughter to his ears.

Boo Boo would not allow anyone to take a life for any reason other than survival or food.

He knew he would become an unstoppable incarnation of destruction if he chose to use violence and justified it with an unnecessary concept of justice or revenge.

Yes.

That was true.

But so what?

“Yoooooo

“Oh, dear.”

And.

After completing her task and returning to the scene, the Sage spoke with more than a little surprise in her voice.

“Now this might be bad. Honestly, I never know what to do about you.”

Between the Lines 2

Boo Boo did not remember his meeting with Beatrice being all that dramatic.

Back when he was still small and round like a stuffed animal, his luck had run out when he had heard some happy-sounding voices in the forest and decided to approach them.

(Squeal!? Humans!!)

Yes, he had found a group of humans there

Humans were generally only interested in the Labyrinth that extended deep underground, but they were not exactly a welcome sight for an Iberian Orc. They kept human statues in their homes at the village and called them messengers from heaven, but if an Iberian Orc actually ran across them, the humans would throw rocks at them for no reason. Boo Boo had been told they did that because they were afraid and not because they hated the Iberian Orcs, but it was still not a nice feeling.

He preferred not to think about what they would do if they captured a small and round one like him. Some strength was needed to safely escape them and small Boo Boo clearly lacked that.

Humans were scary.

They had a power that did not exist in the natural world.

(What do I do? I have to run away, but they would find the village if they followed me. I have to take a long way around and lose them first, but then I might get lost!)

He began to panic and ran back and forth on the spot, but…

“S-squeal!!”

A solid impact soon followed.

No one had hit him. He had run head-first into a large tree all on his own. He was knocked back onto his butt and rolled backwards from there. The pain and confusion finally brought tears to the corners of his large eyes.

That was when it happened.

The pain growing in his forehead suddenly receded.

He looked up in wonderment and saw a hand there. Someone was holding their hand over his forehead. Even after realizing it was a human, he oddly did not jump up to his feet. He did not sense the usual dark malice coming from this person.

“You’ll be fine.”

She wore red armor and a miniskirt.

The Magic-using lifeform was entirely different from Boo Boo’s species and she spoke with a small smile. It was not brought on by her own emotions. It was clearly made in order to calm Boo Boo.

“It wasn’t much of an injury. This should be enough to get rid of the pain.”

“S-squeal?”

Boo Boo blinked his eyes and asked a hesitant question.

“You aren’t going to shout at me? You aren’t going to hit me?”

He was afraid that she would say she would do those things.

Not because that would mean she would attack her with hostility on full display, but because it would mean a division between them that necessitated fighting back.

But that human shook her head.

She maintained her kind smile and did not hesitate to answer him.

“I won’t do that.”

“…That’s a relief.”

Boo Boo got up.

He swung his little hands and smiled up at her.

“I’ll be your friend. I can be friends with you!!”

“Bhh, bhhh…”

Memories were not always viewed the same.

Even if the data accumulated in the brain was the same, one’s emotions at the time of recollection could greatly alter the impression they left.

At the moment, that memory was like a torrent of magma.

“Bmoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Chapter 3: Stairway of Rebirth * Spirit Potion Ambrosia

Part 1

While pushing back the dead army that sporadically pushed in, Fairy Queen Sutriona and Vampire Kallikantzaros hid in the island's forest and observed the giant Underworld which was visible in the distance. …Although that also meant they were in the line of fire even from this far away.

"Hey, things might have entered a lull, but are you really going to wait until the next dawn? You can maintain this advantage after I've returned to my coffin at dawn, I hope."

"…So that really will be the limit, will it?"

Even the time it took to speak face-to-face felt like a waste. Some of the dead who had invaded the island in the early stage were still walking around and, more importantly, a single mistake could overturn everything. It may have looked

like a lull, but ruin would rear its ugly head as soon as they let their guards down.

They could not afford to wait until Kallikantzaros withdrew again.

There was no sign of further activity from the Underworld, but the makeup of their forces would change entirely if Boo Boo's Party had been wiped out. They had gotten lucky with how effective the humans' Recovery Magic was, but that would cease to be an option.

They did not want to consider it, but they had to prepare for the worst case scenario.

Sutriona hated how oddly coldly she could think about that.

She realized it had been the same when the Thousand Dragon had been devouring the Fairies. If she had given into emotion and attacked out of revenge, she might have been able to stop the black Dragon's tyranny, but if the Fairy Queen's toxin had caused the Thousand Dragon to writhe in pain and lash out indiscriminately, it could have led to far more damage. *So she had let it continue.* She had only been able to make that decision because she was the queen that stood above all the others.

(This too is my role as the one responsible for them…)

The Vampire standing next to her was the opposite: she looked calm at first glance, but she tended to get emotional about these things. Although that may have been why she

was forced to live alone in a ghost ship instead of banding together in a group.

“The next dawn is our time limit. If Boo Boo and the others haven’t emerged yet by then, we’ll have to end this ourselves. We’ll gather together all of the Break News that can fight and finish off the Underworld in a simultaneous attack.”

Part 2

She was dead.

Dead, dead, dead,

“Ugh…?”

Beatrice groaned as all the skin on her body felt something akin to cold. Her recent memories were not at all clear. Where was she and what had she been doing? Driven by that strange sense of unease, she held herself in her slender arms. Her awareness finally caught up when she noticed the odd feeling that reached her fingers.

She was not in her usual red armor or miniskirt.

Half her vision seemed oddly dark and a touch from her fingers told her she had an eyepatch on. She felt no real pain,

but it would not come off no matter how much she tugged. After giving up on that, she looked down and saw her bright skin and the bandages wrapped roughly around it. The only other things she wore were some rags around her chest and hips. The skin naturally left more of an impression than the clothing.

It was like a fresh Zombie costume.

The bandages were obvious, but the scraps of cloth seemed to have originally been part of a surgical gown. However, it was completely useless as it hung loosely down with the connections torn. The thing digging tightly into her body may have been a clear IV tube.

“Kh.”

When she quickly held the chest part down and moved a bit, she heard a heavy metallic sound. She looked down and saw a metal ring around her right ankle with a thick chain and metal ball attached.

She was in a square space made of stone and metal, so it did indeed look like a prison.

“Wait…wh-what is this!? Was I captured by someone!?”

Just as she looked around in search of an exit, she really felt the weight of the metal ball. No, its weight actually seemed to change…???

Two other people were lying down nearby. When she checked their faces, she found exactly who she expected: Filinion and

Armelina. They too had been robbed of their equipment and forced into something like a costume.

(Halloween…? No, it might be a death or Undead motif.)

She was reminded of the party the three maid sisters had thrown for her in the Detached Magic Palace, but that probably was not the answer. She had to focus on the reality before her eyes.

She wanted as much information as possible.

A closer look showed that Filinion was dressed in the white kimono of a Japanese-style ghost and she had bluish-white super-deformed cow and glasses girl spirits floating around her. Her large breasts were pushed up by the thick corset she wore. It appeared to be made to squeeze her torso in stages and supply pain instead of just being fashionable.

Armelina wore a hat and had a large charm on her forehead. Her clothing could be described as Taoist or as a China dress. Simply put, she was a jiangshi girl. Her skin color was a little unhealthy, but Beatrice may not have been one to talk. But more than the costume itself, her neck and wrists were held in place by a single thin wooden structure much like at the bottom of a guillotine.

While holding the rags and bandages to her chest, Beatrice dragged the heavy ball-and-chain to approach.

She did not know proper prisoner etiquette, but would it be easier to move while carrying it in her hands?

“Filinion, Armelina, hey! Can either of you explain how we ended up like this!?”

Beatrice held her confused head and desperately worked to reach any kind of understanding. Yes, that was right. Their clothing was Magic taking that form, so if it had been taken from them…could they not use Magic at all?

“Ah!? Th-that’s right. What about our Shining Weapons?”

They were gone.

She reached for her hip to check and did not find that reliable and solid weight. Instead, she found the IV tube carelessly wrapped around her body and the clear package dangling meaninglessly from it.

(What do we do…?)

Her vague anxiety had finally been overwritten by realistic fear. Their Shining Weapons were more than just terminals for managing their Magic; they were also used to travel between worlds via the Gates. Without them, they could not return to earth.

Since they could only spend a few days in this foreign world, it was a lot like a slow-paced execution. As the needle moved from fear to despair, Beatrice heard the familiar voices of the other girls.

“Ugh…my head feels so heavy…”

“What is this place? What happened? Gh!? What is this!? A-a

board!?”

Filinion and Armelina seemed to have finally woken up, but their eyes had yet to fully focus. Just like Beatrice, they must not have noticed the change to their clothing at first.

However.

It was because she did not understand the gravity of her words that Filinion said something devastating as her tight corset lifted her breasts from below.

“*Huh? What happened with that thick cable’*…???”

Time slowed.

This time, it slowed to a halt.

The Holy Swordswoman brought a hand to the center of her chest. She was a fresh Zombie with only the bare minimum of bandages and rags covering her. Her chest was mostly exposed…but there was nothing there. There was no pain and there was no horrifically crushed wound.

And.

Looking in the mirror would have had a similar effect, but she felt some déjà vu when she looked back at Filinion’s Japanese ghost costume and Armelina’s jiangshi girl costume.

She had seen something like this before. And then it hit her.

“I don’t have the boots with blades inside, but I have the

surgical gown scraps and the bandages. And then there's the metal restraints. Is this the same as the ancient humans who were destroyed by the Underworld Lord and then had even their souls subjugated by him?"

The only difference she could see was the lack of marine creatures like univalves and octopuses.

She might have only given the worst possible answer in the hopes that someone would say it was not so. But only silence answered her. They wanted to deny it, but they could not. They could only accept it, but they did not want to. That was the kind of stifling silence that ruled the scene.

And in that case…

Had Beatrice and the others lost their battle against the Underworld Lord, been killed, and had their souls taken? Was there no chance of a comeback and were they doomed to eternally work for that monster made from a patchwork of marine creature corpses?

It was not just their Shining Weapons they were missing. They were nothing but souls, so they did not even know what had happened to their bodies. That meant it was not the time to test things through trial and error like they had with the astral projection using that strange jellyfish-shaped terminal. It was possible defeat would mean they could never return.

As the girls desperately worked their minds, a sound reached their ears. It came from beyond the thick door leading out of this cold square space.

It was a solid and regular series of sounds.

They were footsteps.

Part 3

Someone was calling to him.

They were kindly calling his name.

“Boo Boo, wake up.”

The warm tone reminded the last of the Iberian Orcs of that girl he knew so well.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw the Sage smiling right in front of his face.

“!?”

“Hi, Boo Boo. You’ve gotten quite manly since I last saw you.”

He shot to his feet and found he was in a vast space. He was below something like a rotted ceiling, but the entire space may have been bigger than the whole Iberian Orc village.

It was not entirely dark. A small flame flickered at the end of

the hair sticking up from the top of Sage's head while she held a hand to her mouth and laughed.

"Squeal…"

When he brought a hand to his mouth, he realized it was somewhat sticky. A sweet and sour flavor remained on his tongue.

"You're quite powerful, but you have terrible fuel efficiency. Shouldn't you have prepared some food like this before challenging the Underworld? There's no guarantee you can find anything edible in this land of rotting flesh and contaminated water." The Sage lightly waved around a skewer that was far too large for a human. "Skewered Master Rabbit and Sliced Fish soaked in yogurt. That was always popular with the Iberian Orcs, but how did you like it, Boo Boo?"

"…When Armelina gave everyone food, the others got mad at her. Something about luring in pure hearts using treats."

"Cough, cough!!"

She used some blatantly fake coughing to drive that suggestion into the darkness.

Without even suspecting that food from an enemy might be poisoned, Boo Boo began chowing down on the skewer she gave him, so the Sage smiled at him again.

"I never expected to take five hits. You must have been really angry, Boo Boo. It took a *lot* of doing to calm you down."

“?”

Had all of that only been a bad dream?

Boo Boo lightly shook his head.

“So are you alive or dead?”

“Heh heh. Which do you think?”

“…”

“Just kidding. As you can see, I’m very much alive. Here, check for yourself, Boo Boo.”

That person who looked so very much like Beatrice casually took the Iberian Orc’s giant hand and guided the large fingertips toward the center of her chest.

He felt a definite rhythmic pulse within the feminine warmth.

He doubted this was a cold and dead person.

He thought the same thing when he saw the Sage’s soft expression, but an ominous scent cut off his thoughts.

He turned his head and saw something lying there.

It was the remains of the Underworld Lord after being torn limb from limb and having his giant lobster-like head crushed underfoot.

“What…!?”

“Yes, you did that, Boo Boo. You should honestly rejoice that you found someone who let you go all out, even if it meant bending your principles.☆”

He had done something unthinkable.

He had given in and done something horrific.

Boo Boo began to tremble, but the Sage simply smiled. She acted like he was a small child clinging to his mother’s skirt after having a nightmare.

And there was someone else below them.

“Oh, you woke up?”

“Boo Boo isn’t about to die from something like that.”

“Sage, how can you say that after hitting him fifteen times at full power? Although I suppose it is very like you to insist on repaying him three times over even at a time like this…”

“How did things go on your end?”

“Those three are stable.”

Boo Boo’s head shot up when he heard that.

Those three. Yes, that number held an important meaning.

“Squeal!! Wh-what happened to Beatrice!? And Filinion and Armelina too!”

“They’re fine,” immediately replied Royal Elf Sibyl.

Did that mean they had been saved? It had not looked like there was any room for a miracle after the attack from that metal snake, but had their wounds been healed with some kind of complex Magic he did not understand?

However, that was not the case.

Sibyl clarified.

“The Sage enclosed them in ice coffins, so there will be no damage to their brain cells even though their hearts have stopped. Well, you could think of it as a type of cold sleep. Seeing that reminds me of Vivian who lived in that ocean-bottom palace cut off from the flow of time.”

“???”

“Thawing them now would only return them to a state of death from blood loss, so the only question now is whether being encased in ice counts as alive or dead.”

What she meant gradually sunk in.

…You could not call them alive in that state. But they were not simply dead either. Weren’t they stuck in the gap between life and death?

“Yes, this does not solve the problem.” The Sage readily admitted it while raising her index finger. “And, Boo Boo, there is only one thing you can do if you want to save that girl you care so much for: find a method of directly controlling

souls somewhere in the Underworld. They can only be saved by healing both their bodies and souls."

"…"

"And that fits with my goal. Well, technically speaking, it isn't them I want to save, but I am willing to work with you as long as our interests align."

Boo Boo could not immediately reply.

Accepting the tragedy that had befallen Beatrice and the others was difficult enough, but now he was being pressed to make a decision by the Sage who stood a few steps beyond that.

And the Sage spoke the usual line to give his worried back a push forward.

"You need to make your decision sooner rather than later."

"W-will Beatrice and the others not last forever?"

"That *is* an issue, but my point was that our enemy is not gone."

With the red armor, the white miniskirt, and everything else, she looked just like Beatrice, yet she was fundamentally different. She then pointed at the symbol of Boo Boo's crime.

She pointed at the Underworld Lord who had been torn to pieces and entirely ceased to function.

“The ancient humans feared the Underworld Lord so much that they left it all up to Abyss, so surely you didn’t think this was enough to stop him.”

“…Even after all that…he can still move?”

“It’s more complicated than that.” The Sage laughed and gave one last reminder. “If you really want to save Beatrice and the others, you should probably hurry.”

Part 4

The place looked like a room made from a collection of rotting organs.

The Underworld Lord opened his eyes there.

The scene appeared somehow blurry, but that had nothing to do with his bodily functions. His body was contained within a 3m spherical container filled with a clear preservative fluid.

“…”

However, his body did not have a lobster head or squid tentacles. It was not made from multiple marine creatures sewn together with needle and thread. Thin hands broke through the fish-egg-like film from within and a completely

different body crawled into the outside world along with lots of a sticky chemical fluid. It was a slender mermaid with wavy blue hair and bright skin. The scale-covered legs could become a giant tail fin if need be.

She too was the Underworld Lord.

To begin with, let us define an astral body as a form of energy. The fundamental soul is like an imaginary number in that it does not exist in the visible world but some things cannot be explained without it. And it is a source of a certain kind of energy that exists along with a physical body. It may be something like massless chloroplast or mitochondria or like an electrified cloud that envelops the physical body and spreads to the surrounding area.

The Underworld Lord had been born as a being modeled after that soul.

He had no physical mass.

And yet calculations showed he did produce quite a bit of energy. He surrounded a physical body like an electrified cloud and continually poured energy into that physical vessel to give the cold corpse the power it needed to move like it was alive once more. That was the true form of the lifeless Underworld Lord.

If someone was willing to define torn muscles made to expand and contract with chemicals as “alive”, then they might be able to say the Underworld Lord was alive. It was unlikely anyone else would, though.

The Underworld Lord could be seen as a type of perpetual motion machine, but he was not all-powerful. He too was bound by the conditions that defined him.

1. The Underworld Lord cannot live as just his massless real self.

2. As an imitation, the Underworld Lord cannot coexist within a living body that already has a soul.

Simply put, he had to remain within a soulless dead body. And not just anything dead would do. Nerves, muscles, blood vessels, bones, and organs… He could only “change into” a fresh flesh vessel that could maintain all of its bodily functions yet lacked a soul. And critical damage to the brain cells would occur only a dozen or so minutes after the heart stopped, so it was not realistic for him to come across a useable body by chance.

In fact, it was much faster to produce a soulless flesh vessel on his own. For example, he could sew together the best pieces of various marine creatures, he could cultivate one at the cellular level from scratch, or he could rearrange the elemental structure of inorganic materials to produce organic parts.

(The Gothic Monster had no effect.)

He had thirteen distinct methodologies.

Several spherical containers filled with a clear preservative fluid were lined up in the flesh room and two of them had

already been broken open. Eleven remained intact. That could be seen as the Underworld Lord's remaining lives.

(I anatomically assemble the method and then move on to flask chemistry. Next, I will test the effectiveness of the Homunculus.)

To confirm he had safely attached to this nude body, the Underworld Lord opened and closed the right hand and constructed his next plan using the physically-borrowed brain.

He had lost the battle. But if he had successfully convinced the enemy that the Underworld Lord and the Gothic Monster were one and the same, the next surprise attack was guaranteed to succeed. And if they thought the Underworld Lord was dead and the threat was gone, then his odds of success rose even further.

The thirteen methods were a surefire cage for all life forms.

They were all the strongest. It might be possible for the enemy to defeat a specific method – be it of land, sea, or air – if they went all out, but once the target shifted all of their variables in that direction, they could not defeat the next method. If a fish was dragged up onto land or a bird was submerged in the ocean, they could not make use of their strong points and would in fact have difficulty surviving at all. He would bring out a completely different affiliation, completely different traits, and completely different values. The victor against one would lose to another, so with all thirteen methods available, all life forms and all beings would be forced to kneel before the Underworld Lord.

The most inconvenient opponent for the Gothic Monster's victor was the Homunculus.

It was like using Water attacks against someone who specialized in Fire.

The Underworld Lord had a clear vision of victory in mind, but then he came to a stop.

His previously unmoving lips gave a tremor.

"It can't be…"

The pre-established harmony was crumbling.

With his beautiful girl's body still entirely bare, he grabbed a creepy-looking lab tool from a table with enough force for the wet blue hair to swing behind him. As soon as he grabbed the straight club made of crystal, a blue or purple light filled the room. With the stick-shaped light source in hand, he approached what he needed.

"It can't be, it can't be, it can't be!?"

Something was amiss.

He still had eleven bodies left in stock. Each of those flesh vessels had been designed in the strongest form he could think of at the time, but there was a blatantly obvious "signature" left on them. There were no fingerprints, but the purple light showed definite handprints on their surface.

"…!?"

There was no point in preserving them now.

There were also several handprints on the wavy blue-haired girl's body he was moving now. This could not stand. He tore open a random one of the spherical containers, pulled the precious body out of the sticky preservative fluid, and did not hesitate to rip open its belly with his bare hands. He dragged out the innards, shined the purple light on them, and…there they were.

There were handprints there as well.

He did not know who, but some third party had snuck in here, pulled out, examined, and fully analyzed all of his bodies both inside and out, and then put them all back together before leaving. There was no other way of explaining the absurdity of having someone else's handprints inside his own bodies.

"Curses!!"

The body did not so much as stir as he had ripped open its belly and the Underworld Lord yelled as he tossed it aside. Without even washing his hands, he thought about who this could have been.

…He realized something had indeed seemed off when he clashed with the Holy Swordswoman, White Witch, and Fighter Priest there. Instead of coincidental contact, it had felt more like they were being guided by some third party. While the Underworld Lord had been dealing with them, *the true threat* had come here, completed their work, and safely left. That was likely what had happened.

The Underworld Lord's greatest advantage was his ability to switch between flesh vessels. While remaining the exact same being, he could swap out his surface vessel for entirely different abilities, elements, and values. That led to the ideal combat pattern in which he attacked his target from multiple angles.

But all of those options had been analyzed. Their deepest depths and every nook and cranny had been divulged.

Information was the greatest weapon. In that case, he could no longer defeat this third party. No matter which body he used, they would attack its greatest weakness and he would be defeated every time. The only way of defeating this third party was to construct a new flowchart that existed outside the thirteen strategies he had already prepared.

"…"

The girl with wavy blue hair and bright nudity exposed thought for a while.

And he took immediate action. He tore apart all of the spherical containers with his bloody hands and dragged the surviving bodies out onto the wet floor. He consulted the diagram in his head to line up each piece, carefully examine them, sew them together, and draw out a brand new design. It was a lot like rearranging robotic arms and weapons to create your own idea of the strongest mech.

And his current body was no exception.

Just like someone unbuttoning and removing a shirt, he did not hesitate to use his fingers to “open” up his body along the central vertical line. He used needle and thread, bolts and plates, and various other tools to forcibly sew together a bizarre body that should never have fit together.

(…Not yet.)

This tenacity was the Underworld Lord’s true strength.

The ancient humans had not just helplessly let the army of the dead annihilate them. Before so many continents and islands had been sunk, they had attempted many countermeasures that almost made the Underworld seem cute in comparison.

And yet the Underworld Lord had not been wholly destroyed.

He had tenaciously, persistently, and stubbornly dug in, kept up the attack at a set pace no matter what, and ultimately emerged victorious as the one who devoured the humans who had been worn down by the intense ups and downs produced by their own history.

He was the one who desecrated life and toyed with souls.

So a mere death or two was not going to stop him. He controlled the needle and thread with the accuracy of a clock.

(This will not end here. I am lord. And a lord cannot be defeated so easily…)

Part 5

Thanks to the ball-and-chain around the ankle or wooden stocks around the arms and neck, there was nothing Beatrice and the others could do as the thick door to the square cell of stone and steel was unlocked. They were already dead and they were helpless without their Shining Weapons.

And who was it that walked in?

"…Good. It seems you successfully got your heads out of the dirt."

"Omega…?"

The muscular man in thick armor wielded a giant axe. He had been the cornerstone of the Underworld's invasion force and he had held together the former soldiers of Elkiad, so perhaps *he was in charge of training newcomers.* With that in mind, Beatrice and the others huddled together in their Halloween or Undead-themed costumes, but the large man himself rudely scratched his head.

"If you were just being left to the Underworld, I wouldn't have bothered bringing you somewhere like this. What do you think this room made of solid rock and metal is for? The normal cycle has you mature inside the rotting flesh until your soul has transformed into one of the Underworld's pawns."

“To put that more simply, are you saying you saved us? If so, why?”

Jiangshi Girl Armelina sounded suspicious while unable to hold down the dress’s wide-open slits on her thighs thanks to the wooden stocks. Omega responded by lightly striking the center of his chest and winking.

Something like a white light flashed faintly where his fist hit.

“I guess you could say that solid blow from my wife woke me up a little. Whatever the Underworld might want, I have to do something if Tselika is going to lose her home. But as you can see, it’s too late for my soul. I’ve already been turned into the Underworld’s slave and there’s no saving me. So I needed to secure some pawns to act in my place and I couldn’t let the Underworld know about it.”

“…What proof do we have that we can trust you aren’t working for the Underworld in this?”

Japanese-style Ghost Filinion asked that while clenching her fists in front of the chest lifted by the corset and with cow and glasses girl spirits floating around her.

Omega only shrugged before answering.

“*What if I said you weren’t the first?*”

As the one girl frowned while feeling irritated at the eyepatch covering one eye, the large man stepped aside to clear the way.

Two familiar faces poked their heads in instead.

“Ch-Chief? Are you alive???”

“If they’re here, then they’ve died and become no more than souls, you idiot.”

It was Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra and Ice Waterfall Princess Wildefrau.

Just like Beatrice, the pink twintail girl and blue ringlet curl girl wore something like Halloween or Undead-themed costumes and were bound by different types of restraints.

Huldra must have been a Werewolf because a V-shaped fur outfit covered the bare minimum of her bare skin’s seductive curves. …However, it did look like the ears and tail were moving on their own. She also had her right arm in a cast that was supported from her shoulder by a sling. A look at her expression showed no sign of real pain, so it may have only been the outside held in place by plaster.

Wildefrau was either a demon or a Vampire…but what was that? She was naked except for a cape and a black bikini bottom that looked a lot like a bat. Kallikantzaros from the beach would have probably been enraged had she seen that costume. As for her restraint…was that a thumbscrew? Two small steel plates could be tightened together with a screw and both of her thumbs were currently contained in it like it was a pair of handcuffs.

(Have our souls been bound by our own mind’s image of *the*

wandering dead?)

When she thought about it, Beatrice realized her Zombie costume was different from the Haitian sorcery or the beings given that name because of how they wandered around Ground's Nir. The medical and infection theme was evidence that this was reliant on the baseless visual produced by the entertainment industry. Still, she needed to assume there was something that made it function.

(Do the others have some meaning to them? Huldra being a Werewolf could be a representation of the dual nature of being male on earth and female in Ground's Nir… Although that makes me question Armelina's strict restraints since she could always move…)

Beatrice rubbed the metal ring around her ankle as she considered all this, but she could not come up with a consistent view. It bothered her that she could not organize the information in the usual frames and flame lines.

Also, they had to have arrived in the Underworld through different routes, but what had the Ice Waterfall Princess in a small-horned and hooded cape and the Alchemist Cheerleader in a Werewolf swimsuit been doing while Beatrice's group fought the Underworld Lord (likely after being led their by the Sage and Sibyl)?

"Why are you two here?" asked Armelina while unable to move her arms.

For some reason, the pair awkwardly averted their gaze.

“I-I told her not to do it.”

“Please don’t lie. You were the one that kept complaining about how hot it was and insisted on relying on your ice Magic!”

“What!? Why would you reveal your companion’s shame now!? You could have just let it slide, you know!? There was no use in telling everyone we collapsed with something like Italian king trumpet mushrooms growing from our bodies!!”

“What is this Italian nonsense? Stop trying to make it sound nice! This rotting flesh land uses the lava blood’s heat to sterilize itself, but a certain someone and her giant tits kept cheating and secretly cooling herself down, so all the mold and spores rushed in and- ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!?”

“Besides, you’re the one that only has an Instant Death attack that relies on probability and does no damage which left you completely helpless against the Undead since they’re already dead in the first place!!”

“U-uuhhh… I just hope everyone pitches a tent in their pants when they hear someone mentioning that cute Huldra-chan was surrounded and ganged up on…”

“And wasn’t it you who got covered in mold when you scurried off and hid inside a dark foxhole? C’mon, tell everyone the truth, you nameko bastard.”

Bandage and Rag Zombie Beatrice sighed.

This was a field where the slightest opening led to death.

Those two had apparently not accomplished much before collapsing somewhere in the Underworld. It might sound pathetic, but entering a deadly land without any preliminary research would allow that sort of thing to happen.

Omega spoke up while still leaning against the open door.

“If I hadn’t nabbed them first, they would have been collected by the Underworld like normal. Is that enough for you to trust me a little?”

“…What is it you want us to do?”

“I’m glad to see you’re quick on the uptake.” Omega readily made a suggestion. “I want you to bring this all to an end by doing what those of who are already controlled cannot. In other words, I want you to crush the Underworld Lord’s plans.”

Part 6

When the Sage and Sibyl began to move, Boo Boo was forced to go along with them.

The monster in red armor and a miniskirt cheerfully walked alongside him.

“The internal bleeding has continued a fair bit. The rot has made more progress than is apparent on the surface.”

For the Underworld, bleeding meant erupting with lava.

The large cave of flesh was illuminated by a sinister orange glow. It was hot, but there was no sign of the moisture vanishing and it all weighed on Boo Boo as an unpleasant pressure.

“Where exactly are we going?”

“That is a very good question, Boo Boo. This is near the unused third floodgate of the right gill hole which is currently undergoing regular maintenance. Or to put it more simply, this is the base of the jaws that form its enormous mouth. There are probably a lot of checkpoints before directly reaching the cerebrum, so I hope we can at least get near the spine…”

“?”

“We mentioned that we only predicted Ground’s Nir Abyss and never suspected the Underworld might exist, right? We’ve acquired a fair amount of information through some fieldwork investigation, but it would be best to access a database and acquire some more detailed information to prove our estimations correct.”

Boo Boo looked puzzled, and Sibyl politely explained.

Boo Boo felt like he was walking alongside a lava river, but then he saw a flickering orange-illuminated silhouette

through the steam up ahead.

“Squeal?”

“Oh, guess one of the patrolling guards caught us.”

The Sage sounded entirely carefree.

Immediately afterwards, the black rotting flesh on the ceiling swelled out. Hands and faces emerged one after another and fell down to surround their prey. The dead wielded sword and spear Shining Weapons and rifles that used gunpowder. These probably had the same origins as the Elkiad soldiers Boo Boo and the others had fought on the island of Ground’s Nir, but they were not just fighting on their own this time. There were quadrupedal monsters with a giant eagle’s head, a lion’s body, and giant wings. Yes, the soldiers were riding the powerful Griffins used for races in the inn town.

These were the elites who had been trained to the very limit.

And they were further strengthened by creatures of a foreign world that surpassed human knowledge.

“Zero to all. Charlie Team has made contact with the enemy. One to Thirty, you-…”

A wet sound overwrote it all.

The Sage had not waited until they were done reporting.

Her left hand had already drawn her patchwork rapier from its sheath.

By the time the blade's tip had spun all the way around like a clock's hand, everything was pummeled by gusts, shockwaves, and all other forms of Wind Magic. Was Charlie Zero even able to count how many forms of death were embedded in his dead body? He was bent and torn to pieces in midair and he was crushed into nothingness before he hit the ground again.

There was no need for trial-and-error reconnaissance with an astral body. Nor did the Sage need to use Recovery Magic like Filinion. A single mistake meant instant death in the Underworld, but she swept it all aside with direct firepower.

This could only be called extraordinary.

"Yes, yes. I know I'm really just lashing out. And I know I'm not one to talk after attacking the Iberian Orc village…"

The Sage laughed in a mocking way that Beatrice never would.

Her expression was filled with a dark, dark, and endlessly decadent joy.

"But this was a stroke of fortune. All of you killed the elder and the others out of pure bigotry and discrimination with nothing hidden below the surface, but I never thought I would get a chance to execute you all a second time. The Underworld can be considerate when it wants to be…"

The Sage's weapon was a patchwork of many Shining Weapons, but whose had those been?

Charlie Team fought back almost entirely mechanically and the Sage turned three more of them into charcoal with scarlet flames, so the dead finally tried to put more distance between them. They were already dead, yet they seemed to fear for their lives.

Royal Elf Sibyl put her hands on her hips and breathed an exasperated sigh.

“You’re just being unnecessarily cruel. You can use any kind of Magic you want, so you could always just use Recovery Magic. Are you intentionally avoiding a means of killing them instantly?”

“But that would be so boring.” The dark smile remained on her face. “The ones who haven’t had enough after I kill them will reappear for a second or third round. So this time, I have to give them a taste of death that won’t leave them unsatisfied.”

“Oh, honestly…”

Sibyl breathed from her nose just as several blasts of wind assaulted them. That was to be expected for Charlie Team and their Griffins which could easily send a large horse flying. Since they could not stand up to the Sage herself, they may have decided to take a hostage and gain the upper hand that way.

If you completely ignored morality and ethics, their methodology itself was not wrong.

They charged toward the slender girl as if they planned to more hit her than grab her. And they had enough momentum to break a few bones before collecting her. They shifted their impact time between each other so one of the later ones was sure to hit her even if she dodged the initial attack.

But they had still made a mistake.

They had failed to take a Royal Elf's power into account.

"Fools."

It only took a word.

A moment later, Sibyl had activated her longbow and launched dreadful beams of light. Charlie Team had been charging toward her with the weight and speed of a crane's wrecking ball, but now they flew backwards with twice the speed.

"Land, sea, and air each have their unique rulers. As one of the forest rulers, my Skill is the materialization of residual thoughts. That means I can only use recreations of the past." She brushed aside the thin bit of hair that fell on her cheek. "So you could also say that it was all of you who constructed the violence lurking in this place. Be swallowed by your own deeds and vanish into the light, insurgents of a foreign world."

There was nothing for Boo Boo to do.

A unilateral wave of violence had begun. There was no need to pursue and hunt down individual targets. As the Sage and Sibyl moved further in, the enemy was erased from that

entire unit of territory.

“This is the obvious result.” Sibyl spoke to Boo Boo with a calm expression while raising her Shining Weapon that looked like a purifying staff with a large crystal ball embedded at the top. “The Sage and I were always meant to do this together. Ending your rampage and bringing you along was no more than an accident. So we were never counting you as a necessary part of our fighting force. Life born in the forest, please stand back and enjoy the show.”

Those facing them head-on and even those who tried to hide behind cover were blown through the walls. Those who fled or sought reinforcements were shot in the back and knocked into the lava river. There was no mercy there. Just watching the unilateral slaughter caused a sense of guilt to grow in Boo Boo’s chest.

“Keh heh heh…”

“Sage?”

“Hwa ha ha ha, ah ha ha ha

The Sage's body tilted a bit, but she took no damage. She turned toward her beautiful companion with a strained movement, blinked her eyes a few times, and gave her a completely confused look.

"Huh? Sibyl? What was I doing just now???"

"This would be frightening enough on its own, but let's focus on our objective. I don't want to be dragged along on some decadent quest for revenge. Really, is this any way to act in front of a gentleman?"

Sibyl gave an exasperated look as she coldly fired beams of light from the crystal head of her staff to take out the few remaining enemies. Charlie Team had been fully silenced. Although this technically only meant they had begun their wait to be respawned. The Sage and Sibyl apparently had no intention of sneaking in.

Whenever they ran into Soviets who tried to use their numbers to push through or ancient humans who used special boots containing several long blades, the two of them slaughtered all of the witnesses before they could flee or make a report. They did not use a special compatibility issue like Filinion, so this was nothing but brute force. It was hard to believe this was the same Underworld army that not even all the Break News working together could hold back on the island of Ground's Nir. When faced with the Sage and the Royal Elf, the dead army seemed like baby birds fleeing along the ground after falling from their nest.

"Squeal…"

“Oh? Forest child, is something the matter?”

“If you have this much power, it seems to me you could get past them without fighting.”

“You are exactly right, but you can see how the Sage is. She intentionally triggers an Encounter when she sees someone from Elkiad, so there’s no avoiding them.”

There were no real barriers impeding them. Or rather, there were some impressive hurdles, but those two knocked them all down, leaving them with an easy journey.

Eventually, something appeared before them.

“Boo. …A door?”

“Hmm, this looks like it was added in later.”

It was a tall double door. Even Boo Boo had to look up at it and it looked quite thick. Locked or not, it looked like you would need some kind of tool to even grab and turn the knob. It was colored white and the material looked more like bone than stone or metal.

The two doors were held together by an extremely large purse-shaped lock that hung down. The lock alone was the size of a small safe.

“What should we do?” asked Boo Boo.

“Let me ask you this instead: is there any reason to hold back?”

The lock did not matter.

After an explosion, the entire door collapsed inward.

The atmosphere inside was different.

It was still a tunnel, but the cross section was nearly a perfect circle. There was no way of distinguishing the walls from the floor or the ceiling and something like gear teeth lined the circumference. They were all bookcases taller than Boo Boo. They could not see all the way to the back of the tunnel, so they could not even imagine the full extent of the knowledge contained within.

The tunnel was divided into ring-shaped blocks that slowly rotated left or right, presumably according to some kind of rule.

And…

“Ohh?”

“Squeal!? The Sage is attached to the wall!”

“The gravity setting must change. I guess that’s why the floor, walls, and ceiling are all an indistinguishable circle. It’s made so you can walk all the way around.”

“Is this all of the knowledge contained inside the Underworld?”

“No, the database itself is probably the cerebrum mainframe. The spine is simply the gateway. When the peripheral nerves

in all the different body parts send an information request, it checks the list and decides whether or not to answer the request." Despite her large breasts and miniskirt, the Sage hopped up and down like a child to test the artificial gravity. "That said, we can get all the information we need here if we really can directly access the cerebrum. Now. What part of the list do we have to destroy to break open the floodgates of information?"

"It's always destruction with you," said Sibyl. "Why not be smarter about it and hack in?"

"I guess because there's no real reason to try to be nice?"

Before she had even finished speaking, the Sage randomly pulled thick reference books from a nearby bookcase. Not satisfied with just that, she pulled out the actual shelves and tossed them aside. The circular tunnel itself rotated harshly to the right and left and the entire thing seemed to writhe in pain, but she did not care.

Without warning, something floated up into the air.

It was about the size of a human head. It had a nearly transparent body and two wing-like objects. A human from earth might have described it as a clione ghost.

And it spoke in human language.

"Warning, warning! Inflammation from foreign intruders detected in a first-degree sterilization area. If the foreign intruders show no intent of heeding the evacuation request

or lack the intelligence to understand it, begin an antibody reaction request and begin an immediate injection of SSS-class white blood cells."

"Oh, shut up. Here's what I think of you."

"Gyah, gyah, gyah, gyah, gyah, gyahhhhh!!!???"

Something happened. To Boo Boo, it looked like several long needles had pierced the transparent body, but that seemed to rearrange the internal structure. With her right hand on her hip, the beautiful Sage instructor lightly flicked the floating clione's forehead and winked.

"What are you?"

"Sir!! I was originally one of the evolutionary patterns that branched off from that renamed Iberian Orc there!! My line evolved for life in the ocean and specialized in data processing!!"

"I see… I guess that would be a possibility since all the dead of this world are on his side. And the elder did mention an age when they tried moving out into the sea. But I guess that means you're from a failed line that hit a dead end."

"I now function as a quasi-living search engine that effectively manages the massive amount of information gathered by the Underworld!! You can think of me as a hippocampus that functions independently. It is an honor to meet you, sir!!"

It seemed there were some things in the world more frightening than ghosts. Boo Boo was curled up in a ball and

tearfully trembling, so Sibyl stretched up to gently rub his head.

Part 7

Beatrice was bound by her image of the wandering dead which had dressed her in the bandages and rags of a fresh Zombie. She also had a ball-and-chain attached to her ankle.

And as soon as she opened the door to hell…

“Uuh…!?”

“Beatrice?”

When the red-and-silver-haired girl groaned, Filinion tilted her head with the cow and glasses spirits floating around her.

Once again, the metal ball’s weight had changed.

(I-is it reacting to something? Like to my intent to “run away” or “escape”?)

“You should be careful,” said Wildefrau. “This thing on my thumbs reacts to my sticky fingers by tightening like a vise.”

“U-uuh,” groaned Huldra. “When I try to act cutesy, it

increases the number of casts."

"So you're supposed to tone down the fake girliness, huh?" asked Armelina. "If they're all hitting people where it hurts, then what do my stocks do?"

Beatrice's outfit was only possible in a foreign world that utterly ignored things like human rights, so she held down what little clothes she had and dragged the ball-and-chain along as she hesitantly left the cell. The scene outside was entirely different.

She had thought they were in one room of a giant, gloomy prison, but that was not the case.

It was something else entirely that filled the half of her vision not covered by the eyepatch.

"What is this? A village…no, a town?"

The Holy Swordswoman who now lacked her red armor and miniskirt could not be blamed for saying that. There were many "rooms" of the same size. And they were not all standalone. Some were stacked on top of each other or lined up alongside each other as they multiplied every which way like cubic bubbles.

The ground was still made of black rotting flesh, but the layout of buildings was orderly enough to create a large road between them. Something like pumpkins swayed irregularly and shined light on it all.

And there were people.

There were men and woman of all ages. Some had costume-like bandages and rags plus a restraint just like Beatrice, but others were combat personnel with Percentage-type armor and a Shining Weapon just like Omega. The Arachne spider-crab fusion contraptions they had seen on the island of Ground's Nir were also pulling around carts like horses.

"Hm?"

"What is it, Armelina?"

"Now that we're out in the open…hmm, I'm really self-conscious about this charm on my forehead."

The only real difference from Beatrice's group was the marine creatures attached to all the others. For some reason, the girls lacked that.

"You shouldn't have any of those," said Omega. "Or would you rather have barnacles covering your spine like me?"

"Ew," said Filinion while she and her spirits grew pale in order to be courteous(?).

"But, wow."

The place was more bustling with activity than they had expected.

The people moving about had none of the resentment or dark joy seen on the island of Ground's Nir. Did that "transformation" not occur unless they met someone who had directly harmed them or appeared on a scene related to

their desires in life?

The town was fairly well developed and there was even a guide sign in the center of an intersection. It was unclear what it meant, but a comical ghost doll wearing a white sheet was pointing down each road and exit.

Filinion, the needlessly curvy Japanese-style ghost, seemed somewhat exasperated with how she felt about all this.

“I was surprised when I heard we’d died, but the panic kind of fades away when there are so many people who just accept it as normal. The adaptability of the human mind is a frightening thing…”

Ghost stories were overrun with tales of the dead envying the living and attempting to take the living away with them, but was that really accurate? If the dead were left somewhere like this, wouldn’t they just go with the flow and accept the *peace* they found?

Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina were dumbfounded and overwhelmed by the very un-ghostlike energy they felt. Wildefrau and Huldra seemed to be somewhat accustomed to it since they had been rescued by Omega earlier.

“This apparently wasn’t originally a part of the Underworld. The Fairies used their Craft skills to build it after they got here. And we can only thank them for that since they let everyone else use it all for free.”

…Would the dead Fairies be the ones that had been sacrificed

to the Thousand Dragon? Well, they could probably die plenty of other ways in the survival-of-the-fittest natural world.

The Fairies were apparently quite interested in anything productive because they had a few food stands lined up on the roadside where they were preparing strange baked goods and candies. While the kitchen tools were the perfect size for a human, the Fairies looked like they were swinging spears around.

“All of it’s sweets.”

“It’s probably meant as combat rations. It might seem silly, but a small treat can be effective for pro and amateur alike. And some small but high-calorie candy or chocolate makes for excellent emergency rations.”

The aroma of some kind of flat and spread-out dough being cooked on a large metal plate did inspire hunger, but…

“Oh, but I wouldn’t rely on the drinking water and food here, Chief.”

“Yes, this is meant for the people who are only thinking about how long until they respawn after being killed. We aren’t being controlled by the Underworld, so consuming it would be a very bad idea for us. Since they don’t have cooking sake, they just dump in the methanol that seeps out of the rotting flesh.”

Wildefrau explained that while toying with one of the small horns on her hood. However, her thumbs were bound together, so she nearly had to raise her hands straight up to touch her ringlet-curled head. Since she only wore a bat bikini bottom below, her cape had to put up a valiant effort all on its

own to protect her.

“Ehh? But it smells so good…bfhhh!?”

“She hasn’t even eaten a single cookie yet! Was the thought alone enough for Filinion to gain weight!?”

“No…I…the corset is squeezing…why is this…khhh…”

Tears welled up in Filinion’s eyes as the squeezing of her torso only further accentuated her too-ample breasts, so Beatrice glanced down at the ball-and-chain attached to her ankle.

(Does it have some kind of trigger like with my metal ball…?)

“Oh, does the crank on your back turn to penalize any wasteful thoughts? The corset around your waist may be a way of warning you you’ll get fat and lazy.”

“That might actually be good for her. Let’s get the cow working until she loses two or three cup sizes.”

The glasses girl’s breathing started sounding more like groaning at this point, so she did not have it in her to complain.

Since everyone else was dressed similarly, Armelina seemed to have gotten used to her flashy hat, clothing, and restraint. It may have been like being at a costume party or nudist beach.

“What is it that separates the equipped people from the unequipped ones?” she asked.

“We don’t get to choose ourselves,” said Omega. “It most likely comes from the social system the Underworld placed on us. Kind of like how there are worker ants and soldier ants. You could say the Underworld is the colony and the Underworld Lord is the queen ant.”

“Would that make us the worker ants?”

“And that means the Underworld and the Underworld Lord can’t do everything on their own. It’s probably similar to how we can’t see for ourselves what’s going on in our stomachs. We’re free to do as we wish until the Underworld Lord directly sees us and gives us an order.”

A closer look showed that the palm-sized Fairies wore something like Halloween costumes as they expanded the town and used the black spider threads to close up the wounds oozing lava. They had to be worker ants.

Meaning…

“Does that mean you didn’t confiscate our Shining Weapons? Were they simply ‘not there’ from the moment we became ghosts?”

“Yes, and that means you can’t use Magic while in ghost mode. So don’t think you can enjoy this foreign world like normal. You might be free of the Underworld’s bonds, but you are also as fragile as a raw egg. You are Level 1. You should assume brushing up against any random weakling will break you. And you of course don’t get any redoes like you do with a partial astral projection.”

"…"

"This is more or less what it means to be *merely human*. You won't have any problems while blending in here, but watch out for anyone you directly interacted with in the past. Like the Underworld Lord. It's not really my place to talk, but-…"

"Oh, what are you doing here, Omega?"

Someone suddenly called out to him from the side, so the muscular man shoved eyepatched Beatrice into the crowd to the other side.

It was Alpha Zero of Elkiad. The gray-haired old soldier and large man faced each other.

"Do you need something, Alpha Zero? I believe I ordered you to get some rest."

"My apologies. The honor of fighting alongside you once more has left these old bones unable to contain my youthful vigor…"

Not good, not good, thought Beatrice as she pushed through the crowd to leave the source of the voices. And the ball-and-chain around her ankle only grew heavier and heavier in response to her desire to flee. That opponent would be bad enough under normal circumstances, but they lacked their Shining Weapons at the moment. Omega had neatly sidestepped the issue, but if they stood out in the crowd and gathered the old soldiers' attention, they could not avoid being tormented to death. The Halloween costume and

restraint made for very mismatched outfits, but that was actually the best way of blending in here. The Underworld was completely insane.

“(Over here, over here…!)”

“(Yes…!?)”

They had managed to move away from Omega and Alpha Zero while keeping a wall of people between them, but they could not completely hide on the main street or back alleys. That left only one option: hiding the tree in the forest. Beatrice and the others naturally pressed together and worked to blend into the group of worker ants wearing similar costumes.

“Cow, this is hardly the time to press those overly-large things against me. Are you trying to show off!?”

“Just so you know, those are Wildefrau’s boobs.”

“Hey, Inoue, don’t think I’ve forgotten you’re a guy. Quit tearfully trying to slip in with the rest of us!!”

“Ahhh, please don’t kick me out when being spotted means death! I’m Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra-chan while I’m here!”

“…Are none of you seriously trying to survive this?”

Omega seemed to have saved Beatrice and the others so they could recover enough to stop the Underworld Lord’s plans, but he had not managed to give them any details. They did

not know where to go or what to do if they wanted to strike back at the Underworld Lord.

“Hey, doesn’t Filinion have way too much clothing? I’ve got almost nothing but bandages! If your sleeves are so long you have to roll them up, then give me some of that fabric!!”

“Wait, Beatrice! Don’t pull! The corset is so tight that there’s no way to get anything off! Gwehhhh!?”

“You complain, but look at these stocks I have to deal with. Nothing about your costume is fair, Filinion. Corsets are fashionable and you can rest your boobs on it. You lucked out!!”

“Umm, as I said, we really should be taking this more seriously,” said Wildefrau.

“You don’t have much room to talk when you’re walking around in public wearing almost nothing but a cape,” said Huldra.

It all led to a lot of tugging, shaking, stripping, and fighting. However, that may have been a good way of blending into the lively city.

Beatrice and the others followed the flow of foot traffic while keeping an eye out for any Elkiad soldiers. On the way, Japanese-style Ghost Filinion (whose glasses must have become a part of her very soul since she still wore them with all her other equipment removed) made a suggestion.

“Things will only get worse if we don’t do anything, so how

about we work out a plan? First of all, will we stay in the town or leave it?”

“The town is full of Elkiad soldiers who are familiar faces in a very bad way, so wouldn’t it be safer to leave as soon as possible?”

“They’re soldier ants, so they’ll probably be patrolling outside the town too. And we might find it harder to hide once we leave the crowds.”

“The Underworld is quite large, so I want to avoid having to search around at random when it’s so dangerous.”

“Does that mean we need to find a treasure map first?”

Beatrice’s comment gathered everyone’s attention on her as she dragged the ball-and-chain along.

…They couldn’t exactly go up and ask people to tell them the secrets that the Underworld Lord had been hiding, but if they stayed near a random food stand and listened in, they could pick up on the various conversations mixed into all the noise.

“Did you hear the new request? Now they want combat rations that won’t melt in the heat.”

“These are supposed to be luxuries, but they’re starting to take them for granted, aren’t they? Well, I do have a bad habit of doing my best work when someone sets up a hurdle for me.”

“Before, they kept asking for vodka, for a wooden stock on

their favorite gun, or for vodka, vodka, and more vodka. They clearly don't understand how hard it is to grow plants in the Underworld."

Naturally, they did not hit the jackpot right away, but…

"Drool…"

"Stop it, cow. You'll get even fatter and suffer for it."

"Again, it's not that I'm gaining weight. How many times do I have to tell you it's the corset's crank torturing me!? Oh, I know! I'll take that charm right off this pale China girl's forehead!!"

"W-wait, stop! I have a really bad feeling about that! Like I won't be myself anymore if you take that off… This'll be worse than after some depressed drinking when I miss the last train home at night!"

"You mean it'll trigger a bonus round in horny mode?"

"Cough, cough, cough! Women lose all their inhibitions when they're drunk in dirty guys' fantasies!"

"Is it a misfire of a preservation instinct? Like wanting to warm each other up during a snowy mountain blizzard?"

"It's all fantasy!! H-humans aren't that simple!!"

Armelina's arms were held inside the thick stocks, so she shook her blushing head back and forth to keep Filinion's fingers away, but that actually seemed to make the charm

flutter dangerously on her forehead.

“Heh heh, eh heh heh. Coming out on top for once is a nice feeling.”

“But, four eyes, did you forget I can still use my legs?”

There was a solid sound of impact and a defeated cry from the cow mixed in, but they spent time gathering any useful information.

The Fairies were throwing strange pumpkin ghosts in a large mystery pot that emitted screams of agony and they boiled those pumpkin ghosts to get the sugar out of them. The Fairies were chatting as they stood on the smooth porcelain edge and prepared the sweets ingredients by flipping them with wooden spatulas far too large for their bodies.

“The deliveries are a real pain, aren’t they?”

“Has that path still not been opened?”

“That Next Generation Embryo area is so complex, isn’t it? It’s an important area, so I wish they wouldn’t summon us there for errands.”

Omega had said he wanted them to do something that he and the others controlled by the Underworld Lord could not. That meant an area that was designated off limits for the dead was highly suspicious.

More importantly, bandaged and eyepatched Beatrice repeated one notable term.

"…Next Generation Embryo?"

Part 8

After reaching the giant rotting marine creature's spine, Boo Boo, the Sage, and Sibyl ran into a vast sea of information. The Sage whispered to the search engine that resembled a clione the size of a human head.

"First, basic information on the Underworld."

"Yes, sir. The Underworld itself is an important natural existence."

"…It doesn't really matter, but isn't it 'ma'am' with women?"

"Is there really much of a difference for a meathead like-bwabwegweh!?"

After being beaten all over by fists covered in metal gauntlets, the clione was trembling and the Sage urged it on with a smile.

"A natural…what was that again?"

"Ubh…yes, sir… The Underworld is not a biological weapon designed by the ancient humans. It is a natural existence that

appeared in response to the world's dark side."

"So the ancient humans were destroyed after they found themselves helpless against the giant monster that appeared out of nowhere?"

"The elimination of all life, including the humans, was merely one step in an ongoing process. The Underworld was originally a god of harvest, making it very different from a male god of destruction."

"I don't understand…"

Boo Boo could not help but say that when this had to do with ancient technology.

Sibyl winked.

"Asking a vague question won't lead us to the next answer. So, Mr…Engine was it? Is the Underworld trying to accomplish something else using all of the human souls?"

"I am only afraid of the Sage, so I have no real reason to do what you-…"

"…"

"Wait, please no. Not anything else to my body!! The currently-existing Underworld has overruled the wishes of all life to carry out a single role: resurrecting the world, sir!!"

"Resurrecting…the world?"

“In other words, reconstructing the world once the resources and environment have reached a dead end. All the world’s civilizations, including the humans, will eventually cease to grow due to a variety of reasons: lack of resources, the spread of disease, worsening pollution, etc. Just before that happens, all life is to be preserved such that they will be unable to advance or decline by even a millimeter, the planet’s resources and environment are to be reset, and all life is to be released once more. By repeating this, the Underworld ensures that civilization can develop endlessly without worrying about the environment or their consumption rate.” The giant floating clione had a soft-looking body, but it still managed to stand at attention. “However, this task requires the rising and sinking of continents and great changes to the air and sea currents, the world climate, the composition of the atmosphere, the planet’s magnetic field and axis of rotation, and much more, so failure to prepare properly would mean wiping out the old age’s life forms while preparing the land. So as previously stated, it was necessary to preserve the souls of all those life forms.”

The Sage brought a hand to her slender chin.

“And that led to the process of collecting dead souls, hm?”

“Preservation of the physical bodies was rejected because there is simply not enough space and the living costs would be too high. But storing the immaterial souls as data accomplishes the same thing.”

So the ancient humans had been unilaterally told they would be saved from environmental destruction and resource

depletion and then their savior had reaped their lives one after another.

Since the humans had created Abyss, a different monster in the depths of their giant armory, it was obvious that they had not simply accepted this.

They had been more advanced than anyone and they had received less salvation than anyone.

“Squeal? This is really confusing…”

“Dumb pigs only need to stay quiet and listen.”

“…Drool.”

“No, Boo Boo. Don’t eat him yet.”

“What do you mean ‘yet’!? And that would sort of be cannibalism! Eeeeek!?”

The giant clione was trembling, but the Sage did not care and urged it to continue.

“U-until the *safety* of every last life form on this world has been confirmed, the main resurrection task cannot begin. The protection of every continent and island is complete, but in recent years, life forms were detected on the surface of the artificial island of Ground’s Nir, so all work was halted to resume the emergency protection task.”

The goal was creation, not destruction.

This sweep of the world was meant to stop the old age before it derailed and build up new rails that never ended.

“…A never-ending supply of fuel. No, it’s just like Noah’s Ark.”

“Squeal? Noah’s Ark???”

“But in that case, why is the Underworld Lord forcing the ‘protected’ souls to do his bidding? Was the Underworld Lord like a monstrous search engine that tells you how convenient it is while stealing all your personal information?”

“My guess is that discrepancy is related to the nature of the Underworld Lord who controls the entire Underworld, sir.”

“What, did the obedient maids go on strike?”

“The Underworld Lord is indeed an important ruler on this giant marine creature. His power is great enough to claim and control all of the souls in this world. But that is a temporary privilege that only lasts until the next age is complete. Once the new rails have been laid out to pass the derailing dead end, he will be just as unneeded as the Underworld itself and both will be forgotten. ”

“Well, it is true the ark’s value rises considerably during the catastrophic climax but there’s no use for it once the flood has been safely overcome.”

“What if the Underworld Lord refused to let himself become unneeded?”

“Are you saying he has no intention of ever letting go of those

souls and he wants them to live here forever? …We've heard a lot of impressive things about this Underworld Lord, but it would seem he's nothing more than a petty banker embezzling the money he's left with."

"?"

"?"

Boo Boo and Sibyl could only exchange a glance and tilt their heads. No matter how intelligent the pig-faced humanoid and Royal Elf were, they could not keep up with earth-centric comparisons.

As a result, it was the Sage and the clione-shaped search engine that maintained control of the scene.

They had gotten some information on the Underworld and the Underworld Lord, but that was not what really mattered to the Sage.

"Does that mean something is hidden in here that has the power to construct an entire world or age? Part of that has got to be a technique related to life."

Regardless of what it was actually doing, the Underworld was meant to preserve the human souls and safely place those souls in different vessels once the world resurrection was complete.

In that case.

Couldn't that same technique be used to transplant the

Iberian Orc souls from Boo Boo's Shining Weapon and into some other vessels?

"Yes, sir."

The giant clione-like search engine answered without delay.

"That would be the *one-and-only* Next Generation Embryo."

The Sage was constantly guiding the history of the world with technology, but not even she was familiar with that term.

"The Next Generation Embryo is the Underworld's most important organ and a masterpiece currently being bred within it. It is the *next originator* that will form the core of a new age. The Underworld is gradually rotting away and its flesh is turning into nutrients much like humus, but once it has entirely rotted, that will be injected into the Next Generation Embryo and the resurrection task will be complete."

"…"

"The Underworld Lord does not want to end the task, travel down the path of self-abandonment, and be forgotten by everyone, so he will not want that process to complete. Originally, the Underworld Lord was meant to procure a new giant creature at that point. The fact that the Underworld's rot *is slowing* is a sign that he is holding it back. After killing so many humans and stealing their technology, he has used data cables and skeletal reinforcements to extend the life of the current generation Underworld by turning it into a sort of

cyborg. And that has left the Next Generation Embryo unused and untouched in the deepest depths. Of course, outright destroying the Next Generation Embryo would mean the task could not be continued and the Underworld would cease to function, so that lord is caught between a rock and a hard place there."

Part 9

A sticky sound echoed through one of the Underworld's rotting pathways.

(The Next Generation Embryo…)

Information rose into the mind of a twisted being sewn together with needle and thread.

He once more had a chance at victory. But it was still not a sure thing.

He needed just one more thing.

Acquire that and victory would be his.

(…I just need the Next Generation Embryo.)

Part 10

Once they knew where to go, it did not take long for Boo Boo, the Sage, and Sibyl to take action.

“This is the spine…so our destination is on almost the exact opposite side. It’s called the Next Generation Embryo, so I’m guessing it would be around there.”

“Ahem. Try to show act more dignified, Sage.”

“If it happens to be that time of the month, will the entire tunnel be filled with lava? Oh, but I guess that would stop while the embryo is growing inside.”

“Now you’re just being vulgar.”

Sibyl closed her eyes and blushed all the way to the tips of her ears, but Boo Boo had no idea what they meant and tilted his head.

“Oh, right, right. Sharks are live-bearing even though they have eggs, right? So what’s this going to be like?”

All the while, tremendous sounds of destruction surrounded them.

The farther they had to travel, the more likely they were to run into the dead and have to fight, but the Sage and Sibyl did

not seem to care. They used their incredible Magic and Skill to easily sweep aside everyone who stood in their way. They primarily sent in a flurry of long-distance projectile attacks, so the dead never had a chance to approach close enough for Boo Boo's close-range attacks. The entirety of the horizontal downpour seemed to have transformed into bombs as the dead were pushed back by the powerful pressure and blown away into the distance.

The closer they got to their destination, the narrower the passageway grew. At the same time, it curved every which way, rose and fell quite a bit, and connected to other paths quite frequently.

"Squeal, it's like a maze."

"Is the complex layout meant to confuse us and keep us from continuing on? Whoops."

Now that the passageway did not follow a straight line, there were more surprise attacks from around corners. They could no longer rely on projectiles like before. It naturally came down to the Sage and Boo Boo making short work of the dead with their Shining Weapons while Sibyl fell back with her weapon that resembled both a longbow and a staff.

"Hm, hm. Hm, hm, hm, hmm."

"Squeal?"

"Oh, excuse me. It's just that I feel like I'm fighting alongside the elder and the others again."

The dead army had swept across the island of Ground's Nir, but they were so little a challenge for the Sage that she seemed more focused on humming and remembering the past. He had been with Beatrice and the others at the time, but Boo Boo was still impressed that they had managed to drive back this monster before.

"…It really has been too long since I felt like this."

"Gah…bh…!?"

"And thinking back reminds me how much you've grown, Boo Boo. Although you still lack some dignity compared to the elder and the others."

"Ghgwah!! Pant, pant…gahhhh!?"

She gently narrowed her eyes, but it was an overwhelming storm of violence she was creating in reality.

As they continued on, they came across a large door made of what looked like white bone. They had needed to pass through the complex maze of passageways and it seemed that would only lead to a dead end or a thick gate sealed with a solid lock, but the Sage showed no mercy.

"This isn't the hymen, is it? I mean, this gate isn't leading to the outside."

"You…You really need to learn some tact, you idiot!!"

They destroyed the entire door and walked on through. A slight change occurred from there on.

"…The dead aren't attacking anymore, are they?"

"The area might be off limits. The Underworld Lord will want to protect the Next Generation Embryo at all costs."

"Well, white blood cells and antibody reactions can cause problems in the human body too."

The intricate maze of narrow pathways widened back out to a single large one. As the Sage had predicted, they must have passed the final line of defense. The rot and bleeding was a lot less severe here and they eventually reached something like a large plaza. It was in fact so large they could not see the other side.

And there they found a small world.

A transparent cube was positioned at the center of the vast space. It measured about thirty meters on each side. The fact that even it looked small was a testament to the room's great size.

Despite the normal shape of an egg or embryo, it was a cube instead of a sphere or ellipsoid.

It was made of straight lines instead of curves.

Was that symbolic of the fact that this was *something which did not exist in the natural world*? It was likely filled with a clear liquid and it contained something other than an embryonic form of life.

It was a tree.

A single giant tree was contained inside with its roots planted firm, its thick trunk extending toward the heavens, and green leaves sprouting from its many branches. The entire thing looked like a large aquarium and the Sage sounded impressed as she looked up at it with a hand on her hip.

“So after all this, we’re back to the idea of a world tree? Well, I suppose that’s the kind of scale you need if you’re talking about constructing the next age.”

“Squeal?”

“Life began in the sea, climbed up onto land, and then ruled the sky. A tree symbolizes all three stages of that process, Boo Boo. Although if we’re talking about a tree that directly absorbs water from the sea, it would have to be more like a mangrove. But looking at it that way, the Underworld is pretty simple. It’s a giant marine creature, but it also rots away to form soil and repeats its bleeding and clotting process to construct minerals. It’s been preparing to build some land up from the ocean so that tree can grow there.” The Sage paused for a moment. “And if you suddenly plant a tree large enough to truly pierce the heavens, it would probably alter the planet’s rotation. Just like adding a weight to one side of a top. By intentionally altering the rotational axis and the flow of lava, it can also build up continents, change the planetary magnetic field, and affect the global climate through the air and sea currents. If the fruit growing on the branches can also be controlled, then its weight balance can be adjusted to smoothly shift the axis. It’s like a program-run controller for the sea, continents, and global climate. If the plan was on this large a scale, I can see why they needed to remove all life

first. …But in that case, how was it supposed to bring back the underground resources? Cause untouched ocean-bottom resources to rise up as continents, or maybe drop lots of fruit and let it rot? No, if it intentionally created and wiped out an animal and insect ecosystem for a few generations before bringing back the people, it might be able to rapidly turn them into underground oil."

Sibyl ruled the forests, but even she had never seen a tree like this before.

The girl looked up at it and the Sage's next words rang in her ears.

"But we don't need the entire world."

That statement was essentially rejecting the entire world, including every continent and island.

Used properly, this may have been able to bring back the ancient human civilization, but the Sage's way of thinking ignored that and only worried about the small island of Ground's Nir.

"All we need to do is save some specific lives right away. We don't need to affect the planet's axis, cause any violent changes in the crust, or build up continents around the world to create a brand new ecosystem. There must be some system for producing and evolving a specific form of life using the environmental changes. We only have to break down the Next Generation Embryo, thoroughly investigate it, and then downsize it. What kind of location is necessary for humans to

breathe with lungs and walk on two legs? Or for the elder and the others to obtain their large tusks and noses? By throwing the souls in question into a properly prepared territory, the rapidly developing and changing environment will give life to the desired physical body. Even if we don't change the world as a whole, we can still use a small experimental field. But just like with an artificial diamond, it consumes energy, so this will use up the rotting flesh. …Now, Boo Boo, cut this free. Its original purpose doesn't matter. We are the victors who survived this long, so let's take our prize."

This was the exact opposite of Darwin's theory of evolution. To ensure the completion of an ideal lifeform, they would stir up the surrounding environment. To return a specific soul to the appropriate body, they would use everything else as a guiding framework.

But something happened just before the Sage took another step toward the Next Generation Embryo.

The rotting ceiling writhed overhead.

And a bizarre form dropped down.

Overall, it looked like a mermaid with slender bodylines. It had long, blue, and wavy hair, a fairly flat chest, and a scale-covered lower body that looked a bit like a fish's tail fin. But it also had two slender legs. The graceful arms of a girl were joined by giant crab claws growing from the shoulders. The large octopus-like head growing from the back may have been synchronized with the girl's brain. The octopus's tentacles were wrapped around the girl's chest and slender arms. It wore no real clothing, so its skin was only covered by the octopus tentacles, the univalves directly clinging to the skin, and a single scrap of cloth. A ring on one of the girl's skinny fingers reflected the lava's glow.

"Vivian…?" muttered Sibyl when she saw the girl with a spiral shell horn on her forehead. "No, is her body simply being reused after it washed up here?"

It was obvious this thing had not been born in this form.

The Underworld Lord had already appeared as a collection of marine creatures, but the Sage understood since she had already examined all of his spare bodies.

"How twisted."

"…"

"I had taken apart and analyzed each and every organ of your thirteen methods, but I guess you realized something was off. It would seem you tried to sew together those black boxes to

create an unknown new one. But the Next Generation Embryo can finish your original task, so it should be nothing but a nuisance for you since you don't want to be discarded. So if you're still so fixated on it…"

"——…"

"You couldn't relax after sewing together that patchwork body. You left all thirteen of your rails, but it still wasn't enough. So the only way you think you can win is to use the Next Generation Embryo to create a brand new flesh vessel and include it in that patchwork body. You wanted to use up what we're trying to use for others. And yet if you lose the Next Generation Embryo, the entire Underworld's work task will be stopped and you won't be able to remain its lord. You lost sight of that."

No more words were necessary.

With a heavy thud, large pieces of metal dropped from the many tentacles that accompanied the Underworld Lord's arms. Several thick chains extended from the end of a long handle and each one was attached to the kind of metal hook used with cranes.

Was it a morning star?

Or a cat o' nine tails?

Its exact classification was unclear, but the way he carried the long handle over his shoulder and let the several shells dangle down from the chains brought a different weapon to mind.

In other words, the symbol of the underworld's ruler.

The scythe wielded by Death.

The Underworld Lord quickly approached in his girl form. He swung the death scythe toward Boo Boo who was closest. At first, Boo Boo reflexively raised his giant log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon to defend, but he immediately changed his mind and jumped straight back.

The enemy's weapon used chains. Even if Boo Boo could stop a sword or a blunt object, a chain would bend and continue on. And if it hit him, the many hooks would tear apart his flesh and organs.

In the human society of earth, Death used a scythe because it was a harvesting tool. Instead of fighting and taking the life, he would unilaterally reap the soul of a specific human. But the Underworld Lord came from a marine creature, so his weapon may have been meant as a fishing hook instead.

And it did not end there.

With a spiral shell for a horn, the Underworld Lord kept attacking Boo Boo while the Sage and Sibyl managed to move to a more advantageous distance. This was especially fortunate for Sibyl whose weapon resembled both a longbow and a staff. She attempted to convert the surrounding residual thoughts into an attack.

(…? There's nothing here??? Oh, no. This area is off limits, so almost no one comes here!)

During that slight lag, the Underworld Lord sent out his left crab claw.

Sibyl had supposedly put a fair distance between them, but it did not matter.

The shell inflated like a giant balloon, burst from within, and scattered the fleshy contents. Then it was compressed down as if being squeezed within a giant hand, so a mysterious liquid was released in an ultra-high-pressure straight line that resembled a laser.

If the Sage had not immediately kicked the back of Sibyl's knees to knock her down, her head might have been taken off.

And this was not just water.

The slight spray that did reach Sibyl sent stinging pain racing across her skin.

"Acid!?"

"No, it's liquid methane! Once it vaporizes at room temperature…"

They heard a quiet sound much like clacking teeth.

The Underworld Lord was striking together the stubbornly remaining fragments of the crab shell.

"…Even the slightest spark or static electricity will trigger an explosion!"

Light burst out and all sound vanished.

Sibyl could only materialize residual thoughts, so she was not actually protected by any Magical Elemental Defenses. The only way she could escape the flames and explosive blast was to rely on the Sage who had knocked her to the floor.

The Underworld Lord had the outline of a slender girl and that also provided him a mermaid's tail fin which extended behind him like a thick, thick tail. He gently swung it around as he took his next action.

Another large crab claw grew to replace the one that had shattered from his shoulder and he resumed the attack.

There was a way to stop him.

Boo Boo charged in and swung his giant Shining Weapon down at the Underworld Lord. He had learned something during the previous battle where Beatrice and the others had been lost.

(If you don't completely destroy his arm, he won't change his attack method!! Instead of tearing it off, I need to break it so it just dangles there!!)

"Boo!!"

The Underworld Lord could not make any further attacks while focused on defense. Boo Boo slammed his blunt weapon against him with enough force to break both the shelled arm and the torso, but the Underworld Lord did not so much as budge.

Something like an octopus tentacle was wrapped around the shelled arm. And it did not give off a sticky glean. It had rapidly dried itself out and tightened itself to make itself incredibly hard.

As a counterattack, the girl's slender arm gave a horizontal swing of the scythe made from crane hooks attached to chains. To avoid having his gut torn open, Boo Boo fell back. Then his nose detected something odd.

He immediately held his breath, but his body still tilted diagonally.

Had he realized that a rapid fermentation was robbing the air of all its oxygen? That being was known as the Underworld Lord and he literally ruled over every part of death. That meant he controlled all sorts of changes that occurred after death: rotting, fermentation, oxidation, saponification, oil formation, etc.

The Underworld Lord picked up further momentum and threw the many chains toward Boo Boo now that he had stopped moving, but…

"Bodily fluids and gasses… Have you no shame!?"

The Underworld Lord was hit by explosive flames from the side. He balled up his torso and mermaid tail, bounced across the ground like a soccer ball, and raised his scythe once the momentum had escaped him.

"*Tch. I hit him a little too hard.*"

“Squeal!? Don’t do that! Destroying a part of his body makes him use a major attack!!”

The red-armored Sage held a giant crab claw in her hand. She did not know what to do with it, so she tossed it aside just as the Underworld Lord grew a new arm without speaking a word.

Having recovered their position, Boo Boo and the Sage ran in from the left and the right.

The octopus head on the enemy’s back rapidly swelled out and something black erupted out in every direction: ink. Boo Boo quickly swung down his Shining Weapon, but he felt nothing there. The ink was probably meant to rob him of his senses, but it felt like being stirred up and dissolved within muddy water.

And…

“Boo Boo, get down!!”

“Squeal!?”

The Sage’s rapier sheath suddenly swept Boo Boo’s feet out from under him. After he tripped and she ducked, Royal Elf Sibyl used the cleared line of fire to raise her Shining Weapon with its crystal at the top and take aim at the mass of ink. Her weapon could look like a variety of different things depending on how she held it, but she tended to hold it like a staff for her biggest techniques.

Sibyl could materialize an object’s residual thoughts and

convert it into her own attack.

There had been no useful residual thoughts in this off-limits area, but she had a trump card.

(Using up your hidden technique means you can't use it later and that creates a lot of psychological pressure, but I have no choice this time!!)

She had only needed to carry a medium for residual thoughts inside her pocket.

Carrying it around for too long would mix in her own thoughts and reduce its accuracy, so this often led to failed attacks and malfunctions. It was really only useful as a "good luck charm" she hoped not to use, but she had no choice but to rely on it here.

She brushed back her hair and pulled out something that had been held in her long ear all this time.

She now held something smaller than her little finger's nail.

The solid object that had lost its luster was a body part that the enemy had recently prepared in order to trap Sibyl in the Girl's Grill. She had collected it from the ruins during the confusion of the Underworld's attack and she had thought about using it as the medium for a curse similar to the human witch doctor, but it had come in handy in an unexpected way.

In other words.

It was Beatrice's back tooth.

Once someone lost their life, they were treated as a “thing”. Anyone who knew of Demon Lord Tselika’s struggles was aware of that cold equation that the world obeyed.

“Metal Jet: check.”

The crystal ball released a flash of light and eight deadly heat beams charged toward the black darkness.

The attacks arrived with staggered time delays, so the first three used their heat to induce a chemical change in the smokescreen ink and wiped away the colloidal optical veil. Then the remaining five rushed toward the Underworld Lord himself.

The leading two struck the scythe made of chains and crane hooks, knocking it back so he could not move. Then the primary attack flew toward his vitals while the last two cut off his escape on the left and right.

Even so, the Underworld Lord tenaciously worked toward survival.

To avoid the primary attack, he forcibly twisted his body out of the way. Heat beams had of course been fired to his left and right, but he held one of them back with the shell of his large crab claw. The beam punched through the armor and tore into the flesh within, but that slightly altered its course. Life and death had shifted. He just barely managed to move to the side the few millimeters needed to avoid a fatal hit.

A fingertip-sized hole was opened in the center of his girl’s

stomach, but he sneered.

His body continued to move.

And a major attack was always followed by a defenseless moment. He must have intended to crush Sibyl with a counterattack because he swung around the scythe to directly hit her with the hook shells.

“Metal Jet: once more!!”

Another eight shots came from where the Sage and Boo Boo had gotten down on the ground.

The Sage could freely reallocate her Experience Points to use any Magic she wanted, so she could do anything Beatrice could.

The scythe was hit just as it was swung forward and the Underworld Lord, who had a spiral shell horn on his forehead, staggered backwards. Not even balling up his torso and mermaid tail would be enough to avoid this one. Unable to keep his balance, he fell onto his back.

If someone did not do something, they would all be killed.

The one who got up with a fierce momentum was Boo Boo.

He held his giant Shining Weapon that could be mistaken for a log or a steel beam. With a crushing rather than stabbing motion, he slammed the flat tip against the fallen girl’s chest.

Something was flattened with a dull sound.

Red blood spilled from the Underworld Lord's lovely lips which must have belonged to someone's corpse.

He was pinned to the ground, so only the mermaid tail could flail back and forth.

Boo Boo's face also twisted in pain, but Sibyl spoke to him from the side.

"You need not feel any guilt. This will have saved Vivian and the others who were used as tools even after their deaths."

"Kh…"

The Underworld Lord's tongue writhed as if some bonds or restraints within his body had been directly destroyed.

For the first time, words left his mouth.

"…So this is the end. Take the Next Generation Embryo for yourselves. It seems to have been too great a burden for me."

"You…"

"Boo Boo, don't feel bad. You haven't done anything wrong."

"Indeed you have not."

The quitter looked up at Boo Boo while lying on his back.

Even now that lord continued to sneer.

"And now it is your turn. The woman is clearly clever and I

doubt the beast is as dense as he looks. So surely you've started to catch on. The Next Generation Embryo is not as convenient as it sounds. I don't know which of you will obtain it, but it cannot bring salvation to you both."

"What…?"

"The Next Generation Embryo is a giant tree with the ability to bring about a new age by influencing the planet's axis of rotation and building up continents, but there is a species barrier at the foundation. So if you chose humanity as the species to stand at the center, it will design an age in which that species can most easily prosper. For some reason, the humans of the past blindly believed that species would unconditionally be themselves."

"…"

"In other words, the Next Generation Embryo *can only save a single species. No matter how much you analyze its structure and attempt to downsize it, that limitation cannot be overturned if you wish to save a specific individual.*"

It was a decisive statement.

That evil which had taken a girl's form gave them a sticky sneer to the very end.

"I have been monitoring your situation through the autonomous hippocampus that manages the spine gateway. Breaking down a single Next Generation Embryo will only provide the equation for saving one species. As they each

have different effective values, you must choose humans if you wish to save Beatrice and you must choose Iberian Orcs if you wish to save the elder. It all boils down to that decision."

Part 11

"…"

"…"

Silence followed.

Neither Boo Boo nor the Sage spoke a word.

The Underworld Lord was effectively no longer present. Someone that could never move again was not an obstacle. There were no tricks or traps here.

Beatrice's Party or the Iberian Orc village?

The single Next Generation Embryo could only save one or the other. Needless to say, they would not reach an agreement if they tried to talk it out. They only had this one chance. And if they could not talk it out, what other method was there? The answer could not have been more obvious.

In a way, Sibyl may have been in a position to view this most

impartially and objectively.

So she could only watch as the battle began.

It was a direct clash with no trickery.

The Sage stopped Boo Boo's giant Shining Weapon with only the rapier held by her slender arm. They pressed their weapons against each other, clenched their teeth, and flung their words at each other like shells.

"Boo Boo, reviving the Iberian Orc village was what you wanted too, wasn't it!? Those are the parents who gave birth to you, the siblings who raised you, and the friends who played with you! Are you really going to reject all of that!?"

"…I can't do it."

"Why not!?"

"No matter what, I can't just abandon Beatrice and the others who were so nice to me!!!!!"

He was crying.

Even as he poured in all of his great body's strength, large tears poured down his face even as he stood right in front of his enemy. This was not an easy decision for Boo Boo. He would love it if he could release all the souls sealed in his Shining Weapon.

The Sage made it look like she was going to push through with even more force, but then she suddenly pulled her sword

back.

Just as the competition of strength ended, the Sage relied more on Magic than her blade.

“Wind Explo- Sky Bla- Shot Stor- Hurricane Ga- Lost Ai- Aero Hamm- Blitz Atta- Homing Bomb!!!!!”

Countless forms of Wind Magic almost seemed to fuse together into a single great torrent. But Boo Boo did not fall back which would only leave him in the path of danger. Nor did he try to block it which would only get him gradually torn apart. He dodged it by rolling toward the Sage’s side.

“!?”

“!!”

They clashed again.

Boo Boo and the Sage’s Shining Weapons directly clashed two or three times.

“…I will go to hell.”

That giant body spoke with a tremor in his voice.

And it soon rose to a shout that seemed like it would trigger an explosion.

“I’ve been through so much pain. My family was killed, I lost my home, and I had stones thrown at me while people called me ugly… But I managed to clench my teeth and bear with it. I

had no other choice. But…but!! I can't do the same thing when it comes to Beatrice and the others!! I-I…sob…I won't give up. I don't want to. Just imagining never seeing her again is making my fingers tremble and I can't make it go awayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

The rules he used to judge himself had completely failed. All he had left were the ugly emotions that told him to achieve his goal even if it meant forcing the consequences onto someone else. But the Sage would not laugh at that monster.

She even felt respect for Boo Boo for having found someone he was willing to go that far for.

"I'm the same, Boo Boo…"

Nevertheless, she did not let up. A dark flame seemed to envelop her body as she faced Boo Boo's pure rampage.

"Even if all of them accepted their deaths, I can't bring myself to accept it… I would sell my soul to the devil if it would let me save the elder and the others. So, Boo Boo, your wish cannot be granted. Because I will defeat you here!!"

"I will save Beatrice and the others."

"I will save the elder and the others."

"So! Move!! Out of the way!!!!!!"

"So! Move!! Out of the way!!!!!!"

Part 12

Sutriona sensed a hopeless “current” forming.

She knew it was bad news, but there was no way of fighting it.

She slowly exhaled.

And the Fairy Queen gave an order to palm-sized Morgan who waited alongside her.

She asked the Fairy to relay a message to all of the Break News who could move.

“Prepare to attack. …It will be dawn soon.”

Part 13

More and more impacts reverberated through the air.

Sibyl simply watched that fight to the death between Boo Boo and the Sage.

She thought this may have been what it was like to watch the end of the world.

If it was simply good against evil, one side simply had to exterminate the other. If it was evil against evil, they could smile thinly and exchange a dirty handshake. But what about with good against good? There was no correct answer there. There was no compromise or resignation. So the only result was for them to continue fighting to the end even if it meant throwing the world itself into the furnace.

They were foolish yet kind.

But they were not that simple either.

They had to understand that throwing someone else under the bus to resurrect those people would not lead to the bright smiles they pictured in their heads. No matter how bright the outside world was, they would still know the truth and that very brightness would eventually be too much to bear.

Even so.

No matter what.

Like a drowning man grasping at straws, they could not stop fighting. They seemed to be putting their regrets off until later as they worked to crush the “enemy” before their eyes to bring someone precious back to life.

Steel clashed with steel and the intersection of tremendous arm strength and incredible Magic produced more and more deafening sounds. Neither of them was unscathed. They were

both scattering dark red blood all around them.

Looking purely at the specs, Boo Boo could not defeat the Sage when he was fighting all on his own with no form of support whatsoever. The previous victory over her had been in an elevator that restricted movement and with three Level Cappers on his side.

And yet he continued to fight even as he was bloodied.

It did not add up. If you tried to explain it with simple emotion and said his feelings were simply that strong, it was unlikely that the Sage would laugh at you even if she had supposedly brought logic and efficiency to their limit.

After all, the pillar she was trying to break here was formed from Boo Boo's ideals, his desire, his future, and his happiness. Unless she broke all of that, she could not reach her goal of resurrecting the Iberian Orc village and the elder.

Royal Elf Sibyl could not take either side.

"…"

Was that because she was impartial?

Because she was a coward? Because she was indecisive?

Sibyl herself could not find the answer. She simply decided not to pretty up the fact that she could not choose.

But that may have been why she was the first to notice a slight oddity. It was objective Sibyl who noticed, not Boo Boo

or the Sage who were actually participating in the fight.

“Oh?”

Something that should have been there was not.

Yes.

“…Where did the Underworld Lord go?”

Part 14

Some others were watching from even further away.

They were hiding behind the cover provided by a boulder-like section of the ground built up from the repeated rotting and regeneration. Needless to say, this was Beatrice and the others’ souls who had been given some level of freedom thanks to Omega’s protection.

They had overheard some information concerning the Next Generation Embryo in the town of the dead. With nothing else to go on, they had come here in order to steal a treasure they figured the Underworld Lord would not want taken. However…

“Dammit, what is Boo Boo doing!? We can’t let this

continue!”

“Stop, Beatrice! Without our Shining Weapons, we’ll be obliterated the instant we head out there!!”

Yes, Beatrice was only equipped with bandages, scraps of cloth, and a restraint, so she did not even have the bare minimum of muscular reinforcement from Magic. She was no more than a frail girl who might die if a stray dog bit her. And since they had escaped the Underworld Lord’s surveillance, they could not enter the normal process in which the dead could wait to respawn after dying. They would only be placed under the Underworld Lord’s control if they did.

However.

“Haven’t things reached a much larger scale since we last spoke with them?”

“It seems that Next Generation Embryo can be used to resurrect us,” said Wildefrau in her horned and hooded cape and bat bikini (bottom only) and whose thumbs were restrained, forcing her arms to squeeze her large breasts between them.

“Are Boo Boo and the Sage fighting over who gets to use that!? Th-th-th-th-this is no joke!!” shouted Werewolf-mode Huldra as her face grew pale and her ears and tail stood straight up.

Someone else had placed their fates on the scales and this decision could take away their chance at resurrection. That

would certainly be frightening…*but that was not the issue here.*

The fluffy Werewolf girl had more to say.

“I mean, there are tons more Next Generation Embryos further back, aren’t there!? It’s wrong to fight so desperately over one when there are so many more!!”

Boo Boo and the Sage should have considered it.

The octopus head on the back of the Underworld Lord’s patchwork girl body had used ink to scatter a colloidal optical veil. That meant they could not necessarily see everything there was to see. That had hidden what existed further back.

Even if the hidden objects were gigantic and lined up like harbor warehouses.

It was true that the Next Generation Embryo was something special. It was not an inorganic weapon like Ground’s Nir Abyss. It was a biological structure that could only be formed within the giant marine creature that was the Underworld.

However.

A single embryo per womb was a logic that only applied to humans or similarly-structured lifeforms. For example, some of the sharks, which were seen as the strongest marine creatures, could release dozens or even hundreds of eggs at once.

That said, there was only one world. Having tons of those

trees growing at once would be a problem, so they were likely divided into different sections. One section was for creating and preserving the embryos and another was used for actually raising one and allowing the next age to blossom. Boo Boo's group had been viewing the one sent to the latter section. If the first one succeeded, all the others would be abandoned. If the first one failed to complete the next age, another embryo would be dragged into that section. The process would repeat endlessly until success was finally achieved.

Sharks used eggs to reproduce, but they also had a unique habit of warming the eggs within their wombs.

This was nothing unusual.

There was not just the one Next Generation Embryo. There was a thick forest of them.

Their incalculable value had tricked Boo Boo and the Sage into thinking they were rare. But since the entire planetary axis had to be shifted and continents had to be built up from the sea in order to create the next age, the Underworld may have wanted as much insurance as possible.

But Boo Boo and the Sage had not realized that.

They had been convinced it was an ultra-rare and one-of-a-kind item.

"…*Was their information being controlled?*"

The Holy Swordswoman frowned and speculated while

annoyed by the feeling of the eyepatch and dragging the ball-and-chain along.

“How did Boo Boo and the Sage learn about the Next Generation Embryos? *I just hope it wasn’t something like a search engine where the host can intentionally influence what information they see.*”

Unexpectedly, that was the truth.

If someone viewed search results that hid the fact that there were multiple Next Generation Embryos, they could only accept that mistaken information.

However, while Boo Boo was one thing, the Sage was not the kind of person to fall for that sort of thing. Had she simply had too little information on the Underworld, or had she lost her cool because it had to do with the Iberian Orc village and the elder.

With the bluish-white spirits floating around her, Japanese-style Ghost Filinion waved her hands in front of her large chest.

“A-anyway, what do we do? I don’t want to let Boo Boo and the Sage continue that pointless battle and, since this has to do with Magic, we need a living person to do the necessary work if we’re going to be resurrected. We can’t have Boo Boo lose and give up on our lives!”

“But if we set foot on the front line there, we could easily be turned to mincemeat before they even noticed we were

there," reminded Wildefrau in her horned and hooded cape and her bat bikini bottom with her arms squishing her large breasts together due to the thumb restraint.

Her opinion was added to by Armelina who was bothered by her hat and who had her arms and neck in stocks.

"And they're going to be skeptical of an idea that's too convenient for everyone. We can't have them thinking about defeating everyone first and figuring things out later."

"Chief, are you saying we need to get Boo Boo and the Sage to search the surrounding area of their own volition?"

"Yes, but how do we do that? The most obvious treasure is right in front of them, so I doubt they're going to take their eyes off it for even a second. And for the Sage in particular, this is going to sound like enemy trickery."

Beatrice brought a hand to her slender chin and thought for a while.

What did they need to convince Boo Boo and the Sage to look away from the obvious goal in front of them and calmly observe their surroundings once more?

(When you get down to it, it doesn't really matter what happens to the Next Generation Embryo dangling in front of their eyes. It doesn't matter to us if the Sage uses it or if it gets destroyed in the battle. Not when there are so many more located further in. In that case, it isn't the crux of the issue.)

She poked at her eyepatch with her index finger and made a statement.

It did not feel right to say any*thing* was at the center of this.

She needed to focus on the *people*.

"…About Boo Boo and the Sage."

"Y-yes? What about them, Beatrice?"

"Let's kick one of their asses. They're only fighting because of their conflicting goals, so that fighting will automatically stop if one of them is removed from the equation."

"You really are the worst sometimes, you know that?'

The main point was the fact that she had not said they would necessarily support Boo Boo and defeat the Sage.

In fact, supporting Boo Boo would not change much of anything. The Sage would see that as the natural arrangement and Beatrice's group was fragile enough to be smashed to smithereens if someone lightly bumped into them since they lacked the Magical support provided by their Shining Weapons. They would not accomplish much if they supported Boo Boo.

They needed to supply the largest shock.

They needed something that would provide an impact overwhelming enough to freeze the atmosphere.

Those two were turning the gears in the simplest direction as they continued their fight, so what did the others have to do if they were to briefly stop those two's movements and create an opening for their thoughts to calm down?

There was only one possible answer.

"*…It looks like the only option is to hit Boo Boo with something significant.*"

"He really might cry…"

Armelina sounded exasperated, but Beatrice was not going to rethink this.

Boo Boo trusted Beatrice's group, so if he received a serious attack from them here, it was sure to come as a major shock. Meanwhile, the Sage would never expect eyepatched Beatrice to take her side. Seeing that unexpected attack would lead her to think about the purpose behind it. Hopefully, that would be enough for her to observe her surroundings once more and realize the truth of the Next Generation Embryos.

"B-but," said Huldra. "We still can't use Magic right now. I doubt Boo Boo will even flinch if a weak girl like me punches him."

"We all know you're really a guy, you fake girl."

"We all know you're really a guy, you fake girl."

"We all know you're really a guy, you fake girl."

“We all know you’re really a guy, you fake girl.”

“I-I’m Alchemist Cheerleader Huldra-chan while I’m here…”

But whatever her gender, the tearful cast girl(?) had still raised a valid concern. Hitting Boo Boo with an unassisted human’s strength would accomplish nothing. Even if Boo Boo did not intend to attack them, they could be torn to pieces like they had been caught under a turning dump truck’s back wheel.

They needed some technology other than Magic to reach Boo Boo and the Sage’s level.

Only one thing came to mind.

“The Underworld Lord is an ancient being just like the humans of this world, so just like Abyss, he isn’t using modern Magic, right?”

“What about it?”

“…Now, there’s a scythe made from chains and crane hooks lying over there. I don’t know what it’s made from or how, but if we swung that around, could it deliver an effective blow to Boo Boo?”

Part 15

The limit was approaching.

While Boo Boo and the Sage's repeated clashes shook their eardrums and the ground below their feet, Beatrice and the other girls got to work.

They were after the Underworld Lord's scythe made of chains and crane hooks that had been discarded on the writhing ground. By hitting her beloved Boo Boo with that, Beatrice could supply enough of a psychological blow to stop the battle between him and the Sage.

However.

"…"

Unluckily, Royal Elf Sibyl had chosen the exact same moment to view her surroundings to find the vanished Underworld Lord.

"You there."

And as soon as she drew her longbow, Beatrice's heart tightened a bit.

(Oh, no. I need to dodge or run away…but when I think that…!)

The ball-and-chain grew heavier.

And a beam of light burst out and struck the scythe on the ground. Beatrice's outstretched hand only just missed

reaching the crane hook scythe before it was sent rolling off into the distance.

If Beatrice's ball-and-chain had not changed – or if she was supported by Magic – she would have been able to nab the weapon before Sibyl's attack reached it.

But what happened was what happened.

And the interference had not gone unnoticed by Boo Boo and the Sage. They had detected the new people that had snuck onto the battlefield.

The red-armored and miniskirted Sage clenched her teeth and let out a roar.

"Why must…why must you get in my way toooooo

There was nothing she could do.

As Beatrice floated in the air, her eyepatch-obscured vision definitely saw a slight smile from that girl whose horned hood covered her curled blue hair.

The sound was unbelievably light.

A moment later, something red hot pierced through the blue girl, she lost her outline, she briefly seemed to glow faintly, and she shattered like crystal. Only some traces of sparkling light remained. She was gone.

All sound had vanished.

Beatrice could not even think about what this meant.

Only Werewolf Mode Huldra in her V-shaped fur outfit was calm enough to lower her ears and speak.

“Okay, I really think I should explain this. You see, Wildefrau and I accidentally got ourselves covered in something like king trumpet mushrooms and collapsed, so she had no choice but to freeze us in -273-degree coffins to sterilize us with the extreme low temperature. That put is in a state that wasn’t quite dead but wasn’t quite alive either, but once the process was complete and our bodies were safe, it was set to automatically thaw us out. And I *was* just thinking it was probably about time for that. Tee hee☆”

“Huldra!?”

Another shot arrived.

Huldra disappeared into glittering light just like Wildefrau, but…yes, once she thought about it, Beatrice realized this was odd. When Omega or Alpha Zero had been defeated back on the island of Ground's Nir, had they vanished in such a dramatic fashion?

(Oh, so that's it… This isn't chess; it's shogi. *Do you switch sides* depending on whether your body is alive or dead at the moment? By resurrecting their physical bodies at just the right time, Wildefrau and Huldra *teleported* their souls back to their bodies.)

"…I see." A dark smile appeared on the Sage's face as she seemed to arrive at the same conclusion. "If the quasi-dead bodies are reactivated, the intruders will be automatically returned to them. In that case…Beatrice, I can unfreeze your dying bodies to summon you back to them. Of course, you'll just die of your wounds shortly thereafter!!"

"Geh, geh!? You were storing our bodies like that!?"

Japanese-style Glasses Ghost Filinion, whose breasts rested atop her corset, grew as pale as her super-deformed spirits, but the Sage did not actually move on to the next action.

That was because the surrounding air roared around them as Boo Boo used all his weight to charge toward the Sage.

"Nhh, Boo Boo!!"

The Sage swung her patchwork rapier, but there were no longer any tactics in Boo Boo's mind. He did not insist on

using his log or steel beam of a Shining Weapon to attack.

He chose something more certain.

He chose something that was guaranteed to protect Beatrice and the others' souls.

A wet sound rang out. Boo Boo had chosen not to avoid the Sage's patchwork rapier and instead caught it with his shoulder. The thin blade was embedded in his thick skin and muscles. A red liquid flowed out. But he did not cry out. He used even more strength to hold the rapier inside the wound using just his muscles and then he took a step forward.

No form of Resistance mattered any longer. He used the simple pressure on the wrist holding the grip in order to tear the Shining Weapon from the Sage's hand.

"Wha-!?"

The Sage could not even complete her exclamation.

With the force of a dump trunk, Boo Boo tackled the Sage's entire body with his shoulder. Even if she had gone beyond being the strongest, she could not send any commands to her Shining Weapon with it out of her hand. She completely forgot to endure it with her Impact Resistance and her slender body was sent flying in almost comical fashion.

The patchwork rapier remained in Boo Boo's shoulder.

"S-squeal… Beatrice…"

He turned toward the precious person he had successfully protected, but then he seemed to tense up in surprise. Eyepatched and bandaged Beatrice continued moving and reached for the crane hook scythe lying on the ground.

That weapon was as heavy as a steel beam and Beatrice had no Parameter adjustments supporting her, so she could not lightly swing it around one-handed like it was a bamboo or wooden sword. But that did not matter. As long as she could clench her teeth and just barely managed to lift it, there was a way she could use it.

“You too, Boo Boo…”

She spun her entire body around.

A heavy and intimidating wind picked up speed and force as she made more rotations.

This throwing form may have been more like the hammer throw than baseball pitching or javelin throwing.

“You need to come to your sensesssssss

fear numbed over, but that thread of tension could snap surprisingly easily.

And that was where this unexpected shock came in.

It was like how a large natural disaster could lead to cooperation between two armies who had been glaring at each other during a war.

“S-squeal, Beatrice…”

“Well, Boo Boo? You seem to have started a fight to the death over our futures, but did that slap help cool your head? Who ever asked you to do this? Were you really calm enough to view the world around you?”

“…
Squeee

“Well, he can apparently destroy all the ghosts around him and make them restart from the beginning, so we might actually be lucky he isn’t here.”

“How is this lucky!? U-um, he can’t rely on the Next Generation Embryo and he can’t use Huldra or Wildefrau’s bodies since they’ve already been resurrected. Oh, I really don’t like the conclusion I’m reaching here, but wouldn’t he be targeting our bodies!? If he isn’t here, he might be trying to *shatter the ice coffins to truly kill us*!!”

That said, there was not much Beatrice and the others could do.

As had already been revealed, none of the ghosts around the Underworld Lord could maintain their forms if he used his full power. Before even getting to the lack of support from Shining Weapons, they simply could not approach him in their current forms.

But that was not the main question in the bandaged girl’s mind.

Something else bothered her more.

“Wait a second. Where’s Boo Boo?”

She knew the answer, but there was nothing she could do about it.

If their guess was correct, they could not even approach.

“Did Boo Boo leave to go settle this on his own!?”

Part 16

A creepily wet sound echoed through the darkness.

It came from the Underworld Lord who had a single spiral shell horn on his forehead.

With a blue-haired girl at his core, he supported himself on an irregularly pulsating flesh wall and staggered onward with a clear destination in mind.

The scale-covered mermaid tail swayed weakly behind the girl's hips.

Several dead flesh vessels had been sewn together and were being used like a robot. Crushing some organs and bones meant little when he was not too attached to any one body.

(No matter how many of the analyzed bodies I sew together, I still can't escape the enemy's expectations.)

Each time he coughed, a dark red liquid splattered to the ground.

Pain and suffering exploded within his body, but that was only an issue for the temporary vessel of flesh. However, the emotion of fear was a different matter. It squeezed at the

center of his chest like a strange tentacle.

(But it isn't over yet.)

The Underworld Lord continued to struggle while dragging along his body which really was mostly just a corpse at this point.

(This is a flesh vessel I prepared for myself. But if I use *fresh flesh not of my design*, I can escape their equations and achieve victory…)

Only one possibility came to mind.

He resented the very existence of dead beings not under his control, but since those girls' souls were floating around, the bodies they had come from would have to be entirely defenseless.

He could not immediately hijack them since they were being kept in an in-between state of cold storage, but that was not a major problem. He only had to destroy the containers to break the bodies out of cold storage and quickly turn them into fresh corpses.

"Ohh…"

And then he found them.

As the Underworld's flesh rotted, countless caves were formed. There were too many of those small rooms for even the Underworld Lord to keep track of them all, but in one, he found three ice coffins that would never melt even at room

temperature. If what the enemy had said was accurate, those were storage containers supported by the Sage's Magic.

Holy Swordswoman Beatrice.

White Witch Filinion.

Fighter Priest Armelina.

"Ohh, ohh, ohh!!"

He cried out in joy for the first time in a very long time.

All thirteen of the flesh vessels he had created using different methodologies had been thoroughly investigated by the Sage, inside and out, so she knew their strengths and weaknesses. Rearranging those existing pieces could not change the predetermined outcome, so he was unable to overturn the game board.

But if he used these…

He now had a total of three hunks of flesh. If he tore them apart, sewed them together, and created a new flesh vessel to "change into", the enemy's equations would fall apart. By including values the Sage was unfamiliar with, he could reach a result outside her expectations. At that point, defeating them all would be a simple task.

He smiled while coughing up blood, leaning against one of the ice coffins, and rubbing his cheek against it.

This was why he had made that bluff.

He just needed to “change into” this fresh flesh vessel while the enemy was busy fighting each other.

Inside the chilly, clear coffin, Beatrice appeared to be sleeping, but she was not breathing. The coffin was no protection whatsoever. He would dig up this grave and transform the fresh dead into his own power.

“Heh heh.”

The corpse seemed to shine like it had been prepared for him by heaven from the very, very beginning.

Nothing was more persistent than death. In the end, no one could escape its grasp.

In the same way, the ancient humans had built up a civilization more advanced than any other, but it was their own actions that had brought victory to the Underworld Lord.

“Ah ha ha. Ha ha ha

It was a far too loud and heavy footstep that was overflowing with life force.

"…"

Still leaning against the ice coffin, the Underworld Lord slowly – yes, slowly – looked back.

He saw Death standing there.

This being would bring about the demise of the lord of all death. He was approaching with a giant Shining Weapon resting on his shoulder.

"I…"

The Underworld Lord spoke without meaning to.

No, his mouth had been pried open by the pressure.

"I was meant to resurrect the world."

His breathing was heavy.

But that was not simply due to his puny flesh vessel's crushed lungs.

"But I was only allowed to exist *until* the creation of the next age! There was no place for me in the new age once my work was complete!! Me, only me!! I had put in all the work and save everyone, but only I would be shut out of the next age so that I could rot, be forgotten, and die…!!!!!!"

“Were you lonely?”

Death asked just once.

He narrowed his eyes and spoke in an almost irreverently quiet tone.

“Would you not have done all this if someone had joined you?”

“…Don’t make me laugh.”

The Underworld Lord may have had a few different options.

One of those may have been to wisely stall for time until another opportunity presented itself.

But he instead spat out some words. No matter how twisted a form it took, he was the greatest tyrant. He was known as the Underworld Lord and he had acted accordingly.

“I am a savior. Everything will be saved by my hand! Thus, everyone has a duty to be saved! They have no choice in the matter!! Offer up your souls and I will manage them all fairly. And it is all in the name of the lord of all death!!”

“…”

“Kneel, kneel, kneel!! A system with no king is worthless. After surviving so much ugliness, surely you have some sliver of understanding of the mayhem brought about when everyone chaotically seeks their own individual happiness… I will not create a new age and I will not return the world to the

living!! For death is another form of order!!!!!”

That was as far as he got.

The Shining Weapon rose ever-so-slightly from Death’s large shoulder.

Boo Boo had decided to kill the Underworld Lord. His anger had reached its limit.

He no longer cared about his rule about only killing to eat and only taking lives to survive. Anything was fine as long as he could protect Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina.

He would truly become the bloody monster that deserved to have stones thrown at him.

But.

However.

At the very last moment, a certain girl’s face appeared in his mind. Hearing her voice against may have affected him more than he thought.

They had promised to become people who would not disappoint each other when they met again.

That may not have been something to remember at a time like this.

But the pain of his struck cheek returned to him. This was not someone who would simply smile thinly, nod in agreement to

whatever he said, and watch as he walked toward the cliff's edge. There were people who would risk their own lives to stop him if he lost control.

She had stopped him once already, so was he really going to cross that line again?

She had put her life on the line to protect him from that stain, so would he really waste her effort?

Boo Boo could not bring himself to move his raised Shining Weapon. Instead, a wet sound burst from his gut.

"Gah!?"

"…This isn't over…"

He had been hit with an attack from dead ahead. In his crushed girl form, the Underworld Lord had flicked something with his fingers to launch it at high speed. A small spiral shell acted as a bullet that spun like a drill to punch through Boo Boo's thick armor of fat and muscle.

Boo Boo used his thick Shining Weapon as a staff to just barely stop himself from collapsing and the single-horned lord sneered wickedly.

"I will not let it end here. I will take the specimens in the ice and I will take you as you fall here! I will sew it all together and create myself a new ultimate form!!"

Just then, a voice spoke.

“You did well lasting this long, child of the forest. But you need not wear down your soul and dignity with the sin of murder.”

The voice carried tranquility.

It altered the area’s atmosphere just like the ring of a bell.

“…Sibyl…?”

“No new sins are needed to defeat the wicked. The world is made so the evil will fall at the hand of their own deeds. Underworld Lord, if you insist on calling yourself a lord, then show the people you have a way of life worth following, even in death.”

“You…dare…”

The thing borrowing a girl’s form coughed up blood and leaned against one of the ice coffins while glaring back at the Royal Elf with bloodshot eyes. No matter how close he was, he could not change into that body without breaking the ice first.

“You are no more than a doll sitting upon a throne that was given to you. You rule no more than the moss coating the surface of an artificial island and you dare act like the equal of one who rules over the death of all continents?”

“I never once thought of us as equal, you lowest of villains. Now prepare yourself.”

With that, Royal Elf Sibyl raised her Shining Weapon. That

weapon resembled a bow or staff depending on how you looked at it and the decisive result had already occurred by the time it glowed.

Royal Elves could materialize the residual thoughts left in objects and turn them into attacks.

And no matter how much it might move around, a corpse was still a thing.

So.

What was it Sibyl had summoned this time?

“Wha-…ah…?”

For the first time, the Underworld Lord uttered a sound of true confusion. He had sewn several marine creatures to a slender girl’s body to create something like the final evolution of a mermaid…but the arms of that body began to move against their owner’s will.

“…It took a while before I could perceive *this* correctly, but, well, it’s sort of like a piece of trick art. Whether it’s moving or not, a corpse is a thing, not a person. Once I thought of it as the same as using Beatrice’s back tooth, what I had to do all started to click into place.”

No.

In this case, who really was the “owner”? When Sibyl next spoke, her gentle voice was clearly directed at someone else.

“Come forth, *Vivian*. This is a tribute from the ruler of the forests to the ruler of the seas.”

“Wait, this belongs to me! This is my body until I can take over another!!”

“But it is now a mere thing. A thing that once belonged to someone else. And didn’t you hear me? No new sins are needed to defeat the wicked. The world is made so the evil will fall at the hand of their own deeds.”

Nothing more was needed.

(Oh, ohhhh.)

That girl – who was clearly a different person than the single-horned Underworld Lord – gave a smile that Boo Boo had not seen before.

Someone who no longer existed gave them a bow. And then….

(Owaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?)

The villain was not even allowed a death cry.

She placed her hands on either side of her head like she was preparing to remove a helmet and she slowly applied pressure to her skull and brain. She took action to end everything that had begun with her body.

Without a single candidate to hijack in her place, the

Underworld Lord could not maintain his existence.

She seemed to be saying this was her body and she was free to do with it as she pleased.

Epilogue

“Ugh, brrrr.”

“Could you please stop making such weird noises?”

“But I feel so cold. It’s amazing I’m even alive like this…”

“We didn’t have much choice since we had to use the extreme cold to kill all the mold and spores in our bodies.”

Wildefrau and Huldra were arguing on a familiar pathway. Unlike their previous ghost forms that amounted to a nude cape and nude fur, they were fully equipped with their Shining Weapons and Percentage-style armor and clothing. Their souls had returned to their bodies and the cold storage had been removed. Since it also helped warm them, they ran down to the depths of the Underworld, but…

“Oh, it looks like the Chief and the others have reached the climax.”

“Now that we’re back to normal, I can’t help but notice how embarrassing those outfits are.”

“For you, ‘normal’ isn’t much better.”

Beatrice, Filinion, and Armelina were glowing with a pale

light.

The only one who could interfere with the Next Generation Embryo was the Sage since she had a Shining Weapon, so they must have cleared up their misunderstanding.

They could save both the humans and the Iberian Orcs.

Their souls could be given bodies and they would be given the freedom of life once more.

“This isn’t something we can do indefinitely.” The Sage did not even look back toward Wildefrau and Huldra. “There might be plenty of Next Generation Embryos, but they activate by absorbing nutrients from the Underworld’s flesh. Using them will destroy the Underworld itself. We have a limited number of opportunities, so we can’t waste them. So don’t talk to me. It will only distract me.”

It was finally coming to an end. The not-quite-dead were being freed from the Underworld. Manipulating the surrounding environment so it would produce an ideal lifeform according to given values was a very complex method, but the entire world outside of the island had been submerged. They did not have to worry about isolating a small experimental field and it did not matter if some new continent rose to the surface.

“Squeal… I was really worried.”

“Ah ha ha. Yeah, I have to apologize this time, Boo Boo.”

“This isn’t funny!! Boo, you suddenly died right in front of

me!!”

While holding off the pressure as Boo Boo approached, Beatrice had a sudden thought.

With this many Next Generation Embryos, how far could the salvation spread? Would they be able to bring back the Fairies who had been sacrificed to the Thousand Dragon? Bringing back Elkiad would be a bit of a problem, but what about the ancient humans? They had settled things with the Underworld Lord, but they could not relax quite yet. That was how it seemed to her.

But then the Sage spoke to her with thorns in her voice.

“Wipe that grin off your face. It’s distracting.”

“Ahhn?”

Beatrice just about snapped back, but then she realized that the Sage was irritated about something.

Almost like she was angry at reality for not doing what she wanted.

A 1000m black Dragon floated on the predawn ocean like an island.

Summon Hunter Gruagach and Noble Dancer Rusalka were viewing the distant Underworld from atop that giant body.

Of the two, Gruagach suddenly raised her head.

“Onee-sama?”

“Rusalka, I’m sorry, but support me.”

The Summon Hunter slowly stood up and took an archery pose. Her arrow contained the soul of her contractor. In other words, Demon Lord Tselika. This was a request from Tselika.

She loosed that single arrow.

The white line of light drew a parabolic arc as it sliced through the dark predawn sky. It used the support of Rusalka’s Wind Magic to fly accurately over what would otherwise have been an impossibly long distance…

After trying to come up with a good spot for his last moments and coming up with nothing, Omega smiled bitterly and climbed to the top of the Underworld for some fresh air.

A white line of light fell at his feet. The shining arrow transformed into a bewitching Demon Lord with horns and wings.

“It is done.”

“Is it now…?”

After the man’s casual response, the woman paused as if hesitant to speak.

“Do Beatrice and the others know?”

“Their knowledge would not have affected the operation’s success, so there was no need for them to know.”

If anyone had seen the two examples side by side, the difference would have been clear.

As Beatrice and the others made the change from dead to living, their outlines began to glow with a pale light, but Omega’s ghost remained the same. No, while his outline had already seemed to absorb the darkness of the night, it now seemed to be sinking even further.

“With the Underworld gone, the living and the dead will no longer be able to interact. A solid wall is being built between this world and the afterlife.”

“…”

“You don’t need to mourn. If you think about it, this is the natural state of things. Our souls were completely imprisoned and modified by the Underworld Lord, so we aren’t the same as Beatrice and the others who were halfway in between. We are dead spirits while they were only astral bodies…”

In that case, what had this man been fighting for?

Even if he had not taken any conspicuous actions, sheltering Beatrice’s group had to have been risky. Things had luckily gone well this time, but if Beatrice and the others had lost to the Underworld Lord, an investigation would have begun to find out how it had all happened. The dead could not escape

the Underworld, so he would have been found and harshly punished. He had put himself in a lot of danger, but why?

There was no saving him, so what had he been thinking as he watched the ignorant Holy Swordswoman's Party grow so excited at the possibility of resurrection? Depending on how he viewed it, he might have felt anger and worked to trip them up.

"I guess it was all thanks to the solid blow you gave me."

Omega smiled bitterly and lightly tapped his fist against the center of his chest.

He thought he saw a white glow there and he doubted he was imagining it.

"Demon Lord Tselika Wien Alpha Chelydia Lumidrier. I was saved by a piece of your soul. And I wouldn't be much of a husband if I didn't use the freedom you won me for something you could be proud of."

"Dear…"

He likely intended to disappear like this.

While hoping to the end that Beatrice's Party would be resurrected, he would disappear in silence so as not to place an unnecessary burden on them that might cause them to fail.

He had chosen one side and abandoned the other. The Demon Lord silently lowered her head and bit her lip as she forced out the next words.

"…Thank you."

"Sure thing. I'll be waiting for you on the other side. I hope that emulator can distract you from the loneliness in the meantime. He's a good guy, but he doesn't have a soul. I'll be the one you're with in the end."

She could not raise her head.

Tselika was not prepared to watch the moment in which he disappeared.

She heard his footsteps as he turned around and walked off. And she heard several voices talking at once.

"Ahh, ahh. So this is the end, is it? Meridiana and the others love building things, so maybe they'll make graves for us."

"Well, given how scared the Thousand Dragon was, I think we can trust that she's had a change of heart."

"Ohh, ohh. Don't think you're leaving until I salute you, Omega."

"…So we're finally being freed…"

"If what we humans left behind will help new life grow, then I guess there's no point in sticking around. I just wish I could've seen Abyss's completed form just once."

Tselika kept her head lowered as she listened to each voice disappearing one by one.

It continued on and on.

Until the very, very end.

“Wow…”

That innocent voice came from Rusalka who felt left out back on the Thousand Dragon. No, perhaps it was that great distance that allowed her to watch the end from such an objective perspective. That gigantic Underworld visibly withered from within like watching an apple rot in fast-forward.

And as it did, something was released into the dark sky.

They were small, pale lights that resembled fireflies.

There were thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands…no, even more.

The countless twinkling lights flew silently into the heavens as if they had some destination in mind.

“…How pretty. I wonder what that is, Onee-sama.”

Gruagach narrowed her eyes and placed a hand on the girl’s head.

And she answered quietly.

“It must be something out of our reach.”

It was fully nighttime here.

An envoy had arrived at the Detached Magic Palace in Roppongi, Tokyo. The short man had his black hair neatly parted on one side and that hair glittered like a cockroach. He provided a response with a thin smile on his face.

“Concerning your matter of inquiry, I can only say that we cannot make a decision at our own discretion.”

“No, I suppose not. I was expecting it to end like this. However, I was not expecting the government office to be open after hours like this.”

Iroka, eldest of the three maid sisters, replied with a calm expression.

If the golden-egg-laying goose that singlehandedly supported 15% of the nation’s tax income suddenly said she was creating the world’s smallest independent state in the middle of Tokyo, there was no way it would be approved. The request would be quashed at some point along the line. But that was fine. They could gum up the gears by creating conflict between the domestic and foreign individuals who wanted to stop their master, wanted to use her, saw her as a threat, or saw this as an opportunity.

This would prevent a swift and surefire checkmate where the government ordered the Detached Magic Palace taken from them and sent in the counter-terrorist SAT if they did not

obey.

Having their independence approved would of course be best, but simply buying time was still good news. By using that time to come up with a second and third plan to strengthen their defenses, they could increase the odds of their beloved master's survival.

It was a strange idea, but no country had official laws determining the process for a piece of their territory declaring its independence. One instead had to use a national referendum where anything could be put up for consideration. Why was something so important left up in the air? Because having a set method for something increased the odds of someone actually doing it. Nothing would be sillier than creating rules that actively work against your own country.

To sum up, it was simple to claim you were doing it, but whether or not it would actually happen was a different matter.

"Don't worry, Misoka. He's a proper envoy. It looks like they weren't so hasty they sent in an assassin pretending to be one."

"…"

"So, Haruka, stop adding eye drops as a secret ingredient for that tea. Killing him would only make this more troublesome."

"Ugh."

The roach man had been preparing to take a sip, but he instead lowered the teacup back to the saucer.

“I-I must take issue with how you are referring to me as an envoy. That term refers to a representative dispatched to another country.”

“Isn’t that what we claim we are? *This land no longer belongs to Japan.*”

The glasses maid was not smiling.

She was not a philanthropist. If necessary, she was willing to head out to sea and dump a body wrapped in weights. But this short man had information she wanted, so she did not do so.

“So where exactly was our request stopped? Surely you can tell us that much. If you believe in justice, you should have no reason to hide that from us.”

If it had to do with money, it would be the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of Finance. If it had to do with technology, it would be the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology or the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. No, if it was about Pieces, it could also be the Patent Office. If it had to do with the girl’s influence on the power balance, it might be the police bureaucracy or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Of course, all of that was only restricting it to political matters. If they looked at the financial world as well, the range of possibilities would include major corporations and investors.

While Iroka considered a number of possible enemies and matched them each to different weaknesses as individuals or traits as organizations, the envoy man pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped sweat from his brow. Surprisingly, the smell of fabric softener was the household variety found in normal supermarkets. He may have had a beloved wife who he hid the nature of his work from, or he may have been trying to make Iroka think that so she would lower her guard.

And he spoke.

"…A-at Ichigaya."

"The Ministry of Defense!?"

No matter how unexpected the truth she found, Iroka would not let out such an honest reaction in the middle of negotiations. This came from Misoka, the more impulsive second sister.

The short man began sweating even more and he tried to hold it back with the handkerchief.

"Someone at your level would be able to find the truth no matter what we did. Attempting to deceive you would only harm my credibility in the future. And that is not what I…no, that is not what the higher ups would want after sending me here as an 'envoy' as you have put it."

"…Sounds like this isn't fun for you either."

"Government service has its downsides, but I am willing to accept some difficulties after finding someone truly worth

serving."

It was possible that statement was tailor-made to match their sensibilities, so Iroka was not careless enough to sympathize with this man.

"But since you went to the trouble of meeting us face to face at this stage, can I assume that your 'higher ups' do not intend to simply destroy the Detached Magic Palace? Can I assume they are not taking a 'dead men tell no tales' stance?"

"To be honest, protecting their reputation is probably the top priority here, but this is not time to be worrying about that. There is a more pressing issue, after all."

"?"

"The end of the world. …Does that bring anything to mind?"

The glasses maid's expression did not change.

But if someone as well-connected as her could not think of anything, then it was most likely not an earth issue. Iroka made a mental note that this probably had a lot to do with Ground's Nir.

"We have a machine that is simply known as *the simulator* because its development code is unknown. That box can be said to be the true core of this nation. Even the many Over the Walls who have taken root in the world have only predicted its existence but have not been able to actually reach it. The machine has endlessly expanded and repeatedly added external attachments to evolve like a living creature, so

I have no idea what generation of upgrades it is on. However, that being apparently reached an answer recently. And that answer describes the phenomenon that will soon bring about the end of the world."

"…"

"That being has been sounding the alarm for quite a while now. It has spent a very long time subtly working in the people visiting Ground's Nir to apply external pressure in the form of bigotry and discrimination in order to test for any truly dangerous reactions. Well, I will admit it has at times taken that influence too far and unintentionally wiped out the source of the alarm with Elkiad. But things have changed. Recently, the simulator began rapidly producing an entirely different answer. Something major must have happened in that other world and the rails of history have entirely changed," said the short envoy. "And that means this is no time for us to be worried about appearances. We must safely overcome the end of the world and we must find a solution that places our own country in the most advantageous position. To do that, we need as much power as possible. And as the representative Level Capper, Lady Beatrice needs to take a leading role in this."

It was like a dream come true.

How long had the Sage longed for this moment? This dream had seemed so far out of reach that – deep down – she may have given up and really only went through the motions of

pursuing it.

“Boo…”

“…Elder.”

He looked a lot like Boo Boo and she was probably the only one that could tell them apart.

However…no, *therefore* she could tell at a glance.

The Sage threw everything aside and ran toward him in a show of girlish joy that she never would have shown normally.

“Elder!!”

This may have been a moment everyone should celebrate.

Even for Beatrice’s group who had been her enemy.

However.

(…?)

Royal Elf Sibyl, who had lived for so long, somewhat hated herself for feeling so cold inside and viewing it all so objectively. But she could not throw out this observing eye no matter what she did. Her heart pounded inside her chest. That was a warning signal of tension.

But she had no idea what was causing the warning.

And while Sibyl puzzled at her own signal, something

happened in front of her.

“Sage…”

“What is it, elder? Do you still hurt somewhere? Oh, I know. If not, then let’s get something to eat. You’re just as much of a glutton as you look, after all. I’ve learned to make your favorite: skewered Master Rabbit and Sliced Fish soaked in yogurt! When you see this, I promise you you’ll-…”

“…Oh, oh, Sage. *What have you done*?”

“……Eh?”

The Sage of all people sounded utterly confused.

She was not being criticized. The man known as the Elder spoke with anguish in his voice.

“It all would have been over if you had let nature take its course. Everyone left alive could have lived out their lives without incident…”

“What? Elder!?”

Some kind of ominous straining filled the air.

There should not have been anything wrong with his newly-made body. The Sage had been extremely careful to ensure that. Nevertheless, something like red cracks were forming. The cracks glowed like magma and they throbbed irregularly like an evil will infecting the elder’s flesh and blood.

He seemed to be holding something back.

Almost like he would accidentally slaughter his old friend if he relaxed his guard even slightly.

“…I explained our illness to you, didn’t I?”

“Y-yes.”

“This disease causes our blood vessels to clog up and break apart as if our blood is rusting. But we had no idea what exactly it was…”

The Sage stopped breathing. She was supposed to be in a dream come true, but her eyes widened.

“Sage. I do not know if you currently see yourself as the Experience Points sent back from the future or as the body that existed in the past. But I believe this destruction *is not the one that you saw*. Because the dead coming back to life is something that was never allowed in the proper course of history. Because you had experienced true destruction, you assumed no other threat existed and let your guard down, didn’t you? No matter how painful it was, this never would have happened if you had let time pass as intended.”

“You don’t mean… Elder…?”

“The Red Swarm.”

It was like seeing an incomplete pupa split open to reveal the red adult form.

He stripped off his kindness.

And that crimson embodiment of evil and destruction made an announcement.

“Pushing our bodies to the limit to fight Abyss was all well and good, but a mistaken design left us unable to prevent this murderous element from taking over. If you had only killed us first, none of this would have happened…!!”

Even well-connected Iroka frowned at this one.

“…The Iberian Orcs?”

“Yes. That is the identity of the Red Swarm in the new final answer reached by the simulator.” The short envoy wiped away sweat with his handkerchief. “Those Nonhumans are a species from a foreign world, but they have endlessly taken in the strong points of plants and other animals by mating with them. You could call them the strongest. You could say they have completely controlled the natural selection process that is normally reliant on coincidence.”

“But wait. Wait! They’re from Ground’s Nir, aren’t they? There’s no way for them to reach earth! Or are they going to use some trick to influence things here like Tselika did!?”

Most likely, Second Sister Misoka was not even thinking about bargaining. She was simply asking an honest question.

“…The Gates exist.”

“But!! Only humans can-…!!”

“Did I not just say that Iberian Orcs are Nonhumans who have taken in the strong points of plants and other animals by mating with them?”

There was a certain possibility.

They had simply not considered it because it was so ugly.

“Wait…are you saying *they had already contacted humans and taken in human elements* before even the Sage met them?”

“They have pig faces and humanoid bodies. What percentage of human they can be viewed as is unknown, but they might be able to pass through the Gates. They simply never thought to try before.”

Fully bipedal beings that held and used tools with their hands and spoke using the same language as humans had to be rare. There were Fairies and Elves in Ground’s Nir, but it was still possible the Iberian Orcs gained those traits through different roots.

And in that case…

“*A new end of the world has been introduced,*” concluded the short envoy.

He was no more than an envoy. A messenger. All he did was relay the answer the simulator had produced.

That cruel collection of ones and zeroes borrowed the short man's mouth to speak.

"*Once they lose control, the Iberian Orcs will pass through the Ground's Nir Gates and appear all across the earth. That is the identity of the unexpected end.*"

The Sage had not said much about it.

To prevent a fourth-dimensional migration that would send 6 or 7 billion people into the past using Experience Points, she had gone around destroying all technology related to that leap through time and she had abandoned an entire age as its demise approached. Beatrice's group did not know when that age was, but the entire thing was on a dizzying scale and they had not asked much more about it.

Would war cover the face of the planet, would an ominous plague spread endlessly, would the people's greed and evil deeds bring about a great disaster, would they replete all resources and food, or would meteors suddenly rain down from the sky?

The identity of that ruin was still a mystery.

But Boo Boo and the others had not been too worried about it.

That was in the distant future, long after Boo Boo, Beatrice, and the others would be dead. They may have felt like they were discussing the events of some other world that they

would never visit.

But there was one thing they could not afford to forget.

History could change. In fact, it had already been changed.

That had been proven when the Sage traveled to the past and went around destroying all of the technology related to fourth-dimensional travel and when Boo Boo's group had defeated the supposedly unbeatable Sage. And that change was not guaranteed to be a positive thing.

Also, nothing said there was only one way for the world to end.

What if they had failed to suppress a worldwide plague? What if the Americans and Soviets had begun an all-out nuclear war? What if critical failures had occurred in electronics the world over at the turn of the century? What if the meteor that had fallen on Russia had not broken up in the atmosphere and struck the surface intact? What if, what if, what if, what if…

Those possibilities could not be laughed off as absurd.

Changing one thing would cause something else to rise up in its place.

"B-bmoh…"

And sometimes, an entirely different threat would show itself at an even earlier date.

Not even the Sage could see into the future now.

“Bmoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

Afterword

And that's the 5th volume.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

The Boo Boo series focuses on video game fantasy, so in the previous volume, I displayed the difficulty level just for fun. The Underworld this time is even more difficult than that, so I decided to make it even crueler and have the slightest mistake mean death. As mentioned in the novel, the distinction between the living and the dead was quite vague, so the concept of death was treated quite lightly and that might have created a similar atmosphere to my previous series (is that what I should call it?) The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village.

When I first decided to include the Underworld, I got worked up and brought in all of the characters that I couldn't give appearances to because they had died. Once I knew I would be able to use them again like that, I showed no mercy. Even though the setting is a lot like a children's picture book, this series has an awful lot of dead people in it (I mean, I have the entire population of the earth wiped out in the distant future), so I brought in the veterans of Elkiad who had destroyed Boo Boo's village, Tselika's husband, the Fairies eaten by the Thousand Dragon, the ancient humans, etc.

It starts with the veteran apocalypse-lovers celebrating, then the Shrine Maiden Princess uses the RPG standard of zombies and ghosts being super weak to recovery and resurrection magic while she calls one of them Alpha Rice, and it ends with a confrontation with the Underworld Lord who desecrates life by repeatedly "changing into" different flesh vessels. …The heroes put together a tricky party formation to match the cruel boss they were up against, but then the boss's second form took things in the opposite direction and their party was obliterated. That was the kind of "unfair strength" I was picturing it as. Abyss had hacking and jamming to break apart the cooperation between the Underworld and the Underworld Lord and she was also an all-purpose fighter who could take on all thirteen forms herself (by leveling up on site if necessary).

Depending on how I flavored the Underworld Lord, he might have ended up a lot like Abyss in the previous volume, so I had to be careful I didn't give that impression. That was why I gave him an organic theme and made him a thoroughly arrogant evil king. And I feel like he might have been able to go down a different path if he had learned to feel lonely. It might be interesting to compare him and his demise to Abyss, the doll who committed suicide.

One tricky thing is how things elevate in stages if you only think about the given parameters, but the actual tension of the story shoots up at the beginning and then gradually lowers as you grow accustomed to it. This too matches the atmosphere of a game's hardest difficulty level. Even as the enemies grow more and more brutal, things go more

smoothly and you conquer your fears as you master the controls and figure out how to defeat the enemies. I think I demonstrated that feeling here, but what did you think?

Just for fun, I showed what it would be like to include the Sage and Sibyl in your party. In a way, those two bring about the most obvious “invincible mode”, but I hope you were able to compare their differences to Beatrice and the others. The relationship between the Sage and Boo Boo is obvious, but make sure you also focus on the one between Sibyl and Boo Boo as the forest ruler and the target of protection.

As for the Underworld, once you start dealing with life and death, things tend to start getting more mythological or religious. Looking at creation myths in fiction is really more of a Blood-Sign sort of thing, but I thought it would be fun to add that element here since I already had a fantasy world to work with.

If something like the Underworld appeared for a long span of time, how would people talk about it and how much would they fear it? What justifications did the humans use to resist the decision of a higher power and fight back against predetermined destruction? That might make for a fun thought experiment.

On that note, I see the Next Generation Embryo as something like a random challenge like those things were you stick a 100-yen coin in, pull the lever, and get a capsule. Before you try it,

the infinite possibilities are superimposed like in quantum cryptography and the person pulling the lever will keep pulling it over and over in the assumption that what they want will come out eventually. But if you think about it, the mantis babies that swarm out of the egg sac that looks like hardened foam or the sea of roe decorating a bowl work under the same logic. All the others might get eaten, but if just one wins the ultra-rare prize of growing to adulthood, they win. What matters is to view it statistically and think about the number of plays (or number of eggs/embryos) needed to ensure that one win. It takes all that for just one life, so creating an entire generation requires a thick barrage of more and more insurance.

This volume revealed the answer concerning Boo Boo's unfair treatment ever since Volume 1. That is not to say any of that was right or logical and I think it would be entirely reasonable to say it was doing those things that sent the humans of earth down the path to ruin. After so much struggling, a powerful enemy has appeared even though no one is really at fault, but even if they had not appeared, another form of ruin would have reached this series' earth, just as the Sage had seen. I hope they can learn some kindness and make their world a better place. Kindness is not necessarily rewarded, but that kindness might become a replacement for the lottery of life.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Mahaya-san and my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. A new field and a new enemy. This followed the atmosphere of the overall series but still depicted some never-before-seen things, so it could not

have been easy. Thank you very much.

And I give my thanks to the readers. This volume was a constant battle against the ultimate in unreasonable ideas: death becoming almost meaningless. But what did you think? If you look at it in a different light, your view of resurrection and recovery in video game fantasies will change entirely. I hope you were able to enjoy it like that.

And I will end this here.

The undead have their charm, but they're hard to turn into a main pillar…

-Kamachi Kazuma

Translator’s Notes and References

1. ↑ In Japanese, a girl’s headband is known as a Katyusha.

The Weakness of Beatrice the Level Cap Holy Swordswoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble – His Name? Boo Boo - Volume 05

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